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DECEMBER 19, 1915, TO NOVEMBER 11, 1918

BY

GEORGE A. B. DEWAR

ASSISTED BY

LIEUT.-COL. J. H. BORASTON, C.B.

IN TWO VOLUMES

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December 28, 1915. Kitchener's Instructions to Haig, in which the independence of the latter's command is emphasised.

February 27, 1916. Fall of Douaumont Fort, following on the capture by the Germans of the Louvemont heights, convinces the French that the attack at Verdun is to be the chief onemy effort on the Western Front. Haig thereupon promptly offers Joffre all the aid which the latter had asked for a week earlier on the assumption that the Germans were going to launch a big offensive against the French at some point—not necessarily Verdun—on the Western Front. Haig is ready to take over more line; attack strongly wherever it is practicable; and, if necessary, send some of his divisions to reinforce the French.

Joffre expresses his gratitude and declares that this aid enables him to reconstitute the French reserves.

The whole incident is characteristic of the close liaison and spirit of comradeship and co-ordination which exists between Joffre and Haig throughout 1916. They differ at times in regard to French requests and expectations, but they always reach a solution.

Though his command is a strictly independent

one, Haig, in at least one instance, asks Joffre to determine the strategy.

July 3, 1916. Battle of the Somme. Joffre and Foch press Haig to a renewed stroke against the enemy position at Thiopval-Pozières, instead of on the Montauban side, which he judges to be far safer and more promising. In the argument that ensues, Joffre insists on Haig attacking again at Thiopval. Haig absolutely refuses. He proceeds, instead, with his own plan. The rejected French plan must have meant very heavy British casualties, with, in all probability, a severe repulse.

February 27, 1917. At the Calais Conference, the British War Cabinet announces its decision to subordinate Haig to Nivelle. At this time Nivelle is proving himself completely wrong in a matter of vital importance which affects the whole Allied position and plan of operations: namely, the retreat of the Germans to the Hindenburg Line. British G.H.Q. has been expecting this retreat and Gough's admirable operations on the Ancre have precipitated it. A fortnight after the Calais Conference the retreat is general, and even Nivelle, who has hitherto ridiculed the idea, finds he has been quite wrong.

April 9, 1917. The Canadian Corps under Byng, in Horne's First Army, capture Vimy Ridge, a position of great value to us in 1917 and even greater in 1918. Mr. Lloyd George describes it, in a speech in the House of Commons on August 7, 1918, as 'that great bastion.' He appears to claim it as a result of the Calais Conference and the subordination of Haig to Nivelle. ('That was the first experiment in unity of command and it achieved great results.') But Mr. Lloyd George omits to mention to the House

of Commons that Nivelle—to whom he had subordinated the British leader—strongly opposed Haig's decision that we must capture the ridge to make our position secure in the Battle of Arras, etc.: that Haig and the Commander of the First Army wisely insisted, and that, ultimately, Nivelle had to give way.

This attack on Vimy Ridge had formed part of the plan for the 1917 Allied offensive determined on by Joffre and Haig at the Chantilly Conference in the previous year; Haig foreseeing the need of capturing it before proceeding to operations in Flanders which he had been studying since 1915. This fact was also omitted from Mr. Lloyd George's reference to Vimy in his August 7, 1918, speech. The appointment of Nivelle threw out Haig's plans, and delayed till late in the summer of 1917 the offensive in the north. The Battle of Arras had no strategic aim apart from Nivelle's major operation on the French front which ended in catastrophe. So that the one valuable and enduring success of the Nivelle period was the capture of Vimy which had been discussed and decided on by Joffre and Haig at Chantilly in 1916.

May 4-5, 1917. Conference at Paris. After the failure of Nivelle, whose dazzling scheme had enthralled M. Briand and Mr. Lloyd George, it is desired and agreed by the British and French Governments that the British Army shall undertake the Flanders offensive ('Passchendaele'). The fact that the British Government had approved of the proposal for the Flanders offensive was mentioned in the British Commander-in-Chief's Despatch of December 25, 1917, but the reference was censored and struck out by the authorities at home. One of

the reasons which made such an attack, at the earliest possible date, desirable was the very bad position of the British troops in the Ypres salient since May 1915. We were completely overlooked there by the Germans, and our casualties were continuous.

June 1917. Pétain, the French Commander-in-Chief, visits Haig and begs him to continue attacking the Germans in order that the French Army may have time to recover from the condition into which it has fallen.

Under the new regulations, after Pétain succeeds Nivelle, French troops receive, by right, ten days' leave every four months, the result being that 350,000 French troops are on leave at one time as compared with 80,000 British troops.

September 25, 1917. At a conference at Boulogne, French civilian and military leaders urge that the British Army should take over more line. The British Government agrees with this, though Haig himself at the time is absent. The great Flanders offensive is being fought at the time this request is made by the French and approved by the British. Haig protests against such a decision being reached in his absence.

January 10, 1918. The Supreme War Council at Versailles, with the approval of its British representatives, decides that the British shall take over the line even as far as the river Ailette—an addition of 25,000 yards to the sectors agreed upon between Haig and Pétain.

Foch and Clémenceau, going beyond even the Supreme War Council's decision, about this time are pressing that the British Army shall relieve French divisions even to Berry-au-Bac—30 miles south of Barisis.

The British home authorities, meanwhile, do not supply Haig with any fresh divisions with which to man the new and badly organised front as far as Barisis. The British Prime Minister states indeed, at this meeting of the Supreme War Council at Versailles at the close of January, that we have always been 'over-insured' on the Western Front.

January 13, 1918. The British Commander-in-Chief declares such an extension—*i.e.* to the Ailette—would be dangerous and unsound. He requests that he may be relieved of responsibility if his view is not taken in the matter. As a result the question is left to the decision of Pétain and Haig; and by the close of the month the British take over the line as far as Barisis, making a total of 125 miles of active British front.

February 4, 1918. The Army Council protests against the constitution of the Executive War Board of Versailles. The Council points out that this must put the British Commander-in-Chief in an impossible position; and deprive the Council itself of the responsibility entrusted to it under the Constitution of the Realm.

February 1918. The strength of British divisions in France (except those of the Dominions) is reduced to 8 battalions, or a total of 600 battalions instead of 741. Exactly as Haig had warned the Supreme Council of War at Versailles in January would be the case at the then rate of recruitment from home.

End of February 1918. Foch, Clémenceau, and others specially interested in the question of whether there is to be a general reserve in the charge of a committee composed of the representatives of four nations, know definitely that the answer is in the

negative. The British Commander-in-Chief has let it be known that he cannot contribute any divisions other than those already sent to Italy—which divisions, indeed, ought to be returned in view of the coming German offensive in France, and the great length of fighting front which the British have to hold against the strongest of the enemy's troops. Therefore certainly by February 28, 1918, the proposal for a general reserve has perished. Had the British Commander-in-Chief consented to allot six or seven of his divisions to an inter-allied or international committee, the Germans would no doubt have broken through and achieved a decision in their offensive of March 21, 1918.

March 21, 1918. The German divisions on the Western Front, collected in view of the German offensive on the British, now number 192 instead of 146 as in November 1917.

March 21, 1918. The German attack on the Third and Fifth British Armies comes as no surprise, for it has been predicted with almost perfect accuracy by the British Intelligence Department at G.H.Q. But this prediction must not be confused—as it often has been—with the prediction furnished by the Supreme War Council at Versailles. The latter was wrong as regards date, place, and force and disposition of divisions employed in the attack. The Versailles prediction, and map to illustrate it, left out, for instance, the whole area of the Fifth Army. As regards the date of the attack, Versailles predicted not March 21 but the summer of 1918.

March 24, 1918. At Dury, Haig is informed by Pétain that if the enemy continues to press forward towards Amiens, it will be necessary for him to

order the withdrawal of the French troops, now gathering about Montdidier, in a south-west direction so as to cover Paris. As this can only mean the separation of the French and British Armies, Haig resolves that a hard-fighting French soldier must be made Generalissimo. He accordingly returns to his headquarters and wires to the Secretary of State for War and the C.I.G.S. to come over. He himself at once reaches the conclusion that the post must be offered to Foch—stranded at this time at Versailles—in order to avert this extreme danger of a separation between the Allied forces.

This very essential fact seems to have been unknown to Lord Milner when he drew up his notes on the subject, published in 1921.

March 28, 1918. The Seventeenth German Army attacks the British at Arras in order to capture Vimy, the Lorette spur, and other high ground of great importance. It receives a crushing defeat by our First Army magnificently organised under Horne. This repulse ends Ludendorff's hope of securing a decision by his offensive against the Third and Fifth Armies; and spoils his chances of a great success on the Lys.

Ludendorff's object in his attack on March 28 to gain Vimy Ridge, the Lorette spur, etc., was sound policy, for a success there might well have brought the Germans the decision they arrived at. But the skilful preparations of the First Army, which fully expected the stroke and the gallantry of the troops were too much for the Seventeenth German Army.

March 29-30, 1918. A conference is held at Dury between Foch, Haig, Clémenceau and the British Chief of Staff, in order to settle details as to French

co-operation and to hasten the arrival of French troops. At this period Foch's position still appears to have been insufficiently defined. Clémenceau is constantly on the scene, endeavouring to strengthen the arrangements. It has been remarked by some who were in close touch with him there that between March 26 and April 3 he was practically himself generalissimo ! But the dominating strategy of this critical period is Haig's ; and its ruling principle is, first and foremost, to prevent the separation of the two Allied Armies.

April 3, 1918. At Beauvais, at the suggestion of Haig, Foch is entrusted with 'the strategical direction of military operations. The Commanders-in-Chief, British, French, and American Armies, will have full control of the tactical direction of their respective armies. Each Commander-in-Chief will have the right of appeal to his Government if in his opinion the Army is endangered by reason of any order received by General Foch.'

April 19, 1918. The French forces, arrived at length in the Second British Army area, begin to take over portions of our front about Kemmel. Major Grasset, a French writer, has remarked in writing of the situation at the end of April 1918 : 'Unfortunately the British Army on its side was too exhausted to pass to the offensive.' That is true. Between March 21 and April 30 the British Army had sustained the vast burden of the attack by 109 German divisions, as a result of which 8 British divisions had to be disbanded whilst the remainder were left much under establishment.

Though on the night of April 10 the French Higher Command had intimated that at length it was sure the main German attack was being delivered

on the British and not being reserved for the French, and would therefore now move a large French force up to take part in the Lys fighting (which it termed 'La bataille d'Arras'), these fresh troops did not begin to come into line till nine days later.

On April 9 the French had declined to take over any of the British line at the Lys. The idea, founded on an error of the French Intelligence Service, that the Germans were about to attack in the Reims area accounts for the slowness in which French reserves came up in March and April to our aid.

May 27, 1918. First big German offensive of 1918 against the French. The IXth British Corps, consisting of five divisions, greatly weakened through the German offensives of March and April, have been placed between the Chemin-des-Dames and Reims by the French Higher Command, which regards it as a 'quiet' sector well suited for troops resting and refitting. They are, on May 27, with the French troops, overwhelmed though putting up a magnificent defence. British G.H.Q. and the Commander of the IXth Corps uneasy in April and May about the position, but we receive repeated assurances from the French Higher Command and the local French Command that there is no need for uneasiness. The French Intelligence Service—until May 26—is sure that the Germans are not mounting an attack at all in this area. In March this Service had been sure the Germans were about to attack in the Reims area.

June 7, 1918. Allied Conference at Ministère de la Guerre at Paris. British Government naturally anxious as to the position, five American divisions and seven French divisions having been withdrawn

from behind the British front; whilst peremptory orders had been given for several British divisions to be placed astride the Somme, and followed, if necessary, by more. The British Commander-in-Chief is ready to meet Foch's views, but he holds that these British troops should not be moved from his front until it is obvious that German divisions opposite us have been withdrawn into the battle on the French front. He has therefore been compelled to protest; and Foch has replied assenting to this view, but declaring he cannot agree to discuss any order he might issue as to withdrawing troops from the British front. He promises, however, that in future any order for the withdrawal of troops on the British front shall be preceded by due notice to the British Commander-in-Chief.

No particular decision is reached at this Conference, which, however, is very necessary in order to warn the French that they must not expect too much from us at a time when Rupprecht's reserves were still menacing our front.

June 22, 1918. Kitchener's Instructions of December 28, 1915, are modified by the home authorities, emphasising the Beauvais (April 3, 1918) provision in regard to the Commander-in-Chief appealing to the Government in case the Generalissimo gives an order imperilling the British forces.

July 11, 1918. Foch calls for British aid, as he expects a strong German attack on his front. By July 14, Haig and his Staff have conceded what Foch asks for—the prompt assistance of 8 British divisions. The War Cabinet at home, however, dispatches General Smuts to G.H.Q., asking—Would it not be well to appeal to the British Government in these circumstances? Haig at once declines this

offer, and takes all responsibility on himself: and, on July 15, the Germans attack the French front.

By August 7, 1918, Mr. Lloyd George, head of the War Cabinet, appears to have forgotten the above incident. For on that day, in a speech in the House of Commons, he extols Foch for his 'masterly handling of the reserves,' including the British.

July 28, 1918. Foch puts First French Army under the command of Haig for the forthcoming British offensive of August 8 near Amiens; Haig, after a study of the whole position, having reached the conclusion that this particular attack is likely to yield far better results than any other scheme of British attack discussed between himself and Foch.

August 8, 1918. The Battle of Amiens begins. Described by Ludendorff as the black-letter day of the Germans in the war. This is the first of the great and decisive series of British operations, all of which were conceived and worked out by British leadership. This truth has been slurred over or suppressed by those who, combining folly and falsehood, choose to represent that until the British Commander-in-Chief and his colleagues were taken over and inspired by French genius they were strategically inept. (On October 9, 1918, Ludendorff, in a discussion in the Imperial Chancellor's room at Berlin, said the position was good up till August 8. That attack, however, was, he admitted, a blow to the German leadership.)

August 12, 1918. Foch asks Haig to attack at once the Germans at the Roye-Chaulnes positions, to which they have been driven back by the British on August 8. But Haig, having visited this sector and examined the conditions, is convinced

that the German opposition here has stiffened ; that we could not again surprise the enemy in this area ; and that by attacking afresh south of the Somme we should incur heavy casualties and receive a severe set-back. Further reconnaissances on August 13 ordered by him prove the strength of the German position. He tells Foch this, but sketches out an alternative and far more promising and scientific plan of striking north of Arras. A keen discussion follows. Foch continues to insist on Haig attacking the Roye-Chaulnes position.

Haig finally declines to do so.

Foch then agrees to Haig's plan, and promises French aid south of the British front.

August 21, 1918. Haig's plan of attack is put to the test. The Battle of Bapaume starts, and proves a magnificent success. It leads on to the Battle of the Scarpe which breaks the Drocourt-Quéant switch-line, the First Army duly coming into action, as planned by Haig and his colleagues some time before.

August 31, 1918. French and British leaders, now after Haig's decision has been proved absolutely right, are at hearty accord ; Foch eager for renewed and continuous pressure by the British on the retreating German Army, and Haig resolved to carry out the whole of his brilliant and massive scheme of operations.

The British War Cabinet, however, uneasy about casualties, conveys to Haig a warning and discouraging telegram in cipher. He puts this aside and proceeds with his operations, which result in the breaking of the Hindenburg Line and the hasty retreat of the now demoralised German Army on the entire Allied front.

September 3, 1918. Foch issues his Directive 3537 embodying Haig's proposal that the whole Allied advance should be of a converging or concentric character: the attacks hitherto resolved on being, in Haig's view, on eccentric lines, wanting in co-ordination and cohesion. The whole plan for an Allied advance thus takes a grand and scientific form.

September 9, 1918. Haig goes to London and tells the authorities there, on September 10, that the whole character of the war in France has changed, owing to the extraordinary series of British victories since August 8, and that a decision may be secured in the very near future. He asks for mounted men, and all forms of munitions specially designed to increase mobility in the war of movement which he anticipates in the immediate future.

November 1918. The Allied military leaders on the Western Front are fully agreed that, the German Army being defeated and quite demoralised, an Armistice on terms of absolute surrender can be granted. Accordingly the Armistice of November 11, 1918, is granted on such terms.

BOOK I
THE ALLIES' INITIATIVE

CHAPTER I

OUR LEADERSHIP IN FRANCE, 1916-1918 : A PRELIMINARY SURVEY

SIR DOUGLAS HAIG led the British troops of the Western Front for over three years, from 12 o'clock noon December 19, 1915, till the spring of 1919, when Sir William Robertson took over the command at Cologne. No other leader of great armies on the Allied side in the European War was Commander-in-Chief for so long a period on any front on the west or east. Sir John French commanded the British Expeditionary Force for slightly under a year and a half, from the start of the war till December 1915; Cadorna the Italian Army from May 1915 till November 1917; Diaz from that date till the close of the war; Joffre the French Army from the start of the war till December 12, 1916. Sir John French's period of leadership included some of the most critical episodes of the British Army in the war. That has never been in question. There is no danger of the nation forgetting what it owes to the troops and their leaders who in 1914 stood at Ypres, and closed the way to the Channel ports with a few divisions struggling against huge odds in man and munition power, our resources being then inadequate and undeveloped. The margin by which the German onrush in 1914 was held up under Sir John French's leadership was so narrow, as his successor has told us, that 'the word "miraculous" is hardly too strong a term to describe the recovery and ultimate victory of the Allies.' Nothing will dim that lustre. But it is certain that the three years, 1916 to 1919, for massive endeavour and result, form the greatest epoch in our history. We ought often to resurvey this period. We ought to make

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ourselves familiar with all phases of the British campaign. It was one coherent and indivisible campaign : in always the most essential, always the most momentous, theatre of operations—the Allied battle line in France : all other theatres of British and French land warfare being of quite minor importance.

The notion that we have heard or talked enough, too much, about the war and its leadership and strategy, that dwelling on that struggle now it is over diverts us from the work of peace and restoration, is superficial and foolish. The contrary is the truth. Some of the evils we suffer to-day are due to the fact that the mighty drama of the Western Front, especially between 1916 to 1919, when at length we had an army on the great European Power standard in the field, has been constantly misunderstood. The conflict has been viewed in a disconnected manner. Its strategy and leadership have been often seen in a false light.

Largely through a failure to realise the British feat, and the science and foresight of our leadership on the Western Front in those years, we have dropped at seasons into a lowering pessimistic mood ; fallen away from the excellent comradeship of the war, engaged in an ugly snarling wrangle between workers, capitalists, consumers. Some people, distressed by the differences or threats of open quarrel between the chief nations of the Entente, by the withdrawal of the United States from intervention in European problems, by the slowness of Germany to fulfil the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, have asked, did we win the war after all—or did Germany win or draw it ? Others, obsessed by the wage-bill, high prices, dwindling production despite the return of peace, and heavy taxation, have predicted the bankruptcy and downfall of the Empire. That prediction is unsound because it is based on materialism alone. It overlooks the truth that there is such a thing as the soul of nationhood. The term 'bankruptcy,' drawn from Stock Exchange or purely financial operations, is misleading when applied to the after-war problems of an Empire which has lately carried through a mighty, virile achievement, the greatest in the history of the

world. Such a nation cannot be threatened with bankruptcy in the sense of general ruin and failure because its pound sterling is on the wrong side of the exchange with perhaps some small sheltered states that have played no part in a mighty world adventure in which it has itself prevailed. Nations are bankrupt and ruined whose character and will-power have been destroyed, whose honour is tarnished, and whose physical force and resources are spent. This country is exposed to perils of magnitude to-day, but she is at any rate not in or near to that condition. The sovereign courage of her army of millions in France and the calm skill of her leadership there in the field have spared her that peril.

But the whole pessimistic mood is degrading. It will pass presently, but it is hurtful whilst it lasts, spiritually and materially hurtful. There is no dropping into so mean a mood as long as we view aright the glorious national achievement in the west, and carry in mind what would have happened had we failed there in the field. An arranged peace with the Central Powers would have left us in a position incomparably worse than we occupy now; and, had our leadership on the Western Front in the period 1916-1919 been defective or uninspired, an arranged peace is the best we should have secured. That would have broken up the Entente, on which, for some time to come, Europe must in part depend for its chances of peace and recovery. Great Britain must have surrendered her dominant influence as a world Power. The Empire would have wilted away. Writing in the early 'eighties, Professor Seeley made light of the notion that we could whistle off 'the Colonies' and become again, as in Elizabeth's time, a solitary island, 'in a great pool a swan's nest'; but had our military leadership failed in the supreme field of action, would not the Dominions who sent the flower of their manhood thither have been in the temper to whistle us off?

Nor is it certain that, in case of such a failure, we should have secured an arranged peace or 'a draw.' We might have had a still more humiliating and costly peace forced on us by triumphant Central Powers, and in effect have come

to be their 'conscript appanage,' as a great statesman, Sir E. Grey, once expressed it.

The final battle on the Sambre in November 1918—a battle now known to have been decisive as any in Creasy's book—saved us from such an ignominy. The Battle of the Sambre was the crowning victory of an intrepid citizen army.

That army was directed in the field by the best military brains and character combined which the Empire could offer—a Commander-in-Chief, and Headquarters, and Army Staffs, and Army Commanders, who, for years, amidst vast difficulties and at incessant high pressure, had been patiently working and waiting for victory.

These men were the survival of the fittest through the searching selection of modern war. Constant to our tradition and constitution, they held themselves simply to be the servants of the public through Parliament. They encouraged and desired no rivalry with statesmen at home. They refrained from all intrigue against civilian authority. There was nothing in the nature of 'militarism' about the acts or attitude of Commander-in-Chief, Staff, Army Commanders.

And this attitude of our leadership in the field was invariable, no matter whether the nation was cheered by successes in the field, as at the news of Messines in 1917 and the storming of the Hindenburg Line in 1918; or whether it was disappointed, as after the German counter-offensive at Cambrai, and showed its disappointment. In military history it would be impossible to find a leader of troops with less of the 'Alone I did it' spirit about him than the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army.

Arrogance was absent from that scene. Our leadership was inspired by a different quality—a steady confidence in the ultimate triumph of British soldiery and strategy in the west. 'Give us the reasonable reinforcements in men and munitions, and the Army cannot fail you' was its line whether things went well or ill.

At the close of 1917 there was depression at home. The prolonged British offensive in Flanders, with its heavy

casualty lists, was misjudged in the absence of clear evidence that the moral of the German Army had been severely shaken. The Battle of Cambrai had not come up to popular expectation. 'In war, people judge, for the most part,' wrote St. Evremond, 'by the [immediate] success. Let a man show all the good conduct that is possible, if the event does not answer, ill fortune passes for a fault, and is justified but by a few persons.' Cambrai at the close of the German counter-offensive was judged in that light, and led to depression. It was seen that the initiative had passed from us. A great enemy offensive for the spring of 1918 was anticipated, for, through the Russian collapse, German divisions were sure to be transferred to the west. The mass of the nation did not abate its confidence in the military leadership, and was ready for fresh effort and sacrifice; but there were those in high places who by no means concealed their want of faith in our strategy in the west, their wish for drastic changes in the methods of war and the personnel of the command.

It is impossible to overlook the Prime Minister in this connection. Mr. Lloyd George believed we were fighting on wrong lines altogether. He was clearly disheartened by the Flanders offensive. He could not imagine success on the Western Front with our existing leadership and its methods. On November 13, 1917, in a speech at Paris, he condemned our strategy, past and present, all round. For years we had been 'hammering with all our might at the impenetrable barrier in the west.' First, we had wasted our strength—French as well as British—in the profitless battles of the autumn, 1915, and had thrown away the opportunity of really damaging the enemy by saving Serbia.

Next we had engaged all our strength in 'the bloody assaults of the Somme,' when, it seems, we ought to have been preparing to succour Roumania, which was to come down in the general *débâcle*. 'We have won great victories,' he exclaimed. 'When I look at the appalling casualty lists I sometimes wish it had not been necessary to win so many. . . . When we advance a kilometre into the enemy's lines, snatch a small scattered village out of his cruel grasp,

and capture a few hundred of his soldiers, we shout with unfeigned joy.'¹

As to the Prime Minister's interventions in strategy, these must be considered later as they occurred. Under modern democratic regime, the statesman cannot be wholly divorced from the strategy in a broad sense. It is his right, it may often be part of his rôle. But if he intervenes in the actual operations, and does so despotically against the advice of his own military leaders, he is quite out of his province. The misfortune was that the Prime Minister did not, in intervention, know where to draw the line. An exceptionally clever leader in the 'war game' of politics at home, and a brilliant speaker, he knew next to nothing about military operations. Yet he dabbled in them, questioned the generals, British and French, and evidently expected them to be glib in their replies. In subordinating the British Army to Nivelle, he was really intervening in military plans. He spurred on Nivelle to a headstrong course which ended in disaster. It is quite possible that, had he exercised judgment at that period, and refused to intervene in a plan of operations which he did not comprehend, the two military leaders might have arrived at a much better arrangement.

In May, after the failure of the Aisne operations, we shall find him intervening in another spirit, and trying to do good stiffening service. But it was then too late, the mischief had been done.

One wishes one could give anything like a full or fair

¹ On May 4, 1917, at the Quai d'Orsay, when the French Government was set on abandoning the offensive, General Mangin records his saying, after enumerating the total of prisoners and guns and kilometres taken from the Germans: 'Supposez que ce soit l'ennemi qui ait obtenu ce résultat . . . et imaginez la vague de pessimisme qui gagnerait l'opinion publique. Cela suffit à montrer la réalité des succès que nous avons remportés. . . . Les pertes que nous subissons sont très pénibles, mais il est impossible de les éviter si nous faisons la guerre. . . . S'il s'agit d'économiser les vies humaines, nous dirons que les attaques faibles et répétées coûtent autant et plus que les attaques à fond. . . . J'espère que les considérations vous amèneront l'un et l'autre, disait-il en s'adressant personnellement à M. Ribot et à M. Painlevé, à admettre que nous devons tous à la fois donner tous nos efforts.'

account of our military leadership in France during these three years without referring to these incidents. The subject is distasteful. The cries and charges of political partisanship often strike one in such a connection as trumpery and repellant. Especially one would like to avoid reference to the Prime Minister's harsh criticisms of British leadership in the field, and his painfully superficial strategy, because the nation is indebted to him for the rare vigour he showed in the munition movement in the spring of 1915, and for his will to victory. Therein he did in some degree correspond with the wonderful old French statesman, M. Clémenceau.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to convey the truth about this 1916-1919 period on the Western Front without stating certain facts about the intervention of statesmen in military management, a matter they did not understand. Such action sprang from patriotic motive. It is not to be believed that any other motive prompted the Prime Minister, for instance, to his November, 1917, speech in Paris. But the effect on the atmosphere at home was bad. It spread gloom and depression at an ill-chosen time.

As to the Nivelle episode—'plot' would not be an exaggerated term to apply to it—that was hateful. We shall have to examine it in its right place. I have, since learning the facts, often turned it over in my mind, looked at it from various standpoints, but failed to see it in a redeeming light. Statesmen cut an unfortunate figure then—statesmen on the French as well as the British side. One of the few figures in that episode we can regard with admiration was the French Secretary for War in the earlier stages, a gallant upright gentleman, Lyautey. Lyautey, however, was less statesman, after all, than soldier.

One result of ill-informed, impatient criticism of leadership¹ in the field was the shaken faith of masses of workers

¹ Such criticism was not indulged in by Mr. Asquith. He remained staunch. There never has been among our soldiers in France the faintest question about his loyalty to the British Higher Command at this time. Indeed, speaking on November 19, 1917, of the Somme operations, Mr. Asquith declared that these 'saved the whole situation and did at least as much—I am not sure I should not be right in saying they did more

in authority at large, in the whole system of State on which it rests. Loss of belief in authority is deplored to-day. It has never before been so widespread among us. Labour leaders and trade union officials, statesmen and capitalists, are alike anxious about it. Certainly it existed before the war, and is a problem of all democratic nations broadening their bases of liberty. But the danger is encouraged and increased if, at a supreme national crisis, civilian and military authorities clash.

What is likely to be the effect on the working classes, who formed the vast majority in the factory and at the front, of speeches such as that of the Prime Minister at Paris in November 1917? These workers are given to understand that the strategy of the leader in the field consists in costly victories which lead to no more than the release of a few scattered villages and the capture of an infinitesimal fraction of the enemy's troops. Futile, unintelligent bloodshed! Yet this same leader in the field is chosen and kept in his extremely responsible office by the leaders at home. That is a damning admission against the entire State system of authority and administration, civilian and military. It finds a welcome among violent communists and revolutionists whose aim is to destroy the whole system.

The Paris speech and other bad stuff of the kind did not lessen discipline at the front. The fighting man in France paid small attention to such speeches. He kept steadfast and true.¹ But masses of workers at the base absorbed

than anything in the whole war—to damage the prestige of the German Command and the moral of the German Army.' The words were spoken on November 19, 1917, in the House of Commons. They are testimony not alone to the judgment and clear intellect of Mr. Asquith, for at that time he had not the conclusive evidence of Ludendorff that the Somme was a disastrous blow to German hopes and plans: they are testimony to his moral courage, for a statesman risked being regarded as stupid and unprogressive who in 1917 spoke thus of the Somme. Further, Mr. Asquith stated, 'there never was a set of operations more carefully concerted than Sir Douglas Haig's aggressive on the Somme.'

¹ Yet such speeches are perilous. 'If the confidence of the troops in their commander is shaken in the least degree, or if his influence, power, and authority are prejudiced by any display of distrust in his ability to

some of this maladroitness criticism of our leadership, and, through their ignorance of the facts about the military leadership, and the war on the Western Front generally, that worked more than a passing ill.

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The campaign, then, in the main seat of war, the skill and sound strategy of its direction there by Haig and his colleagues at G.H.Q. and his Army Commanders, have not been understood as they should be by a great many people; otherwise, dwelling far more on their grand work and the wonderful triumph and blessing of British arms, we should largely have escaped the blighting pessimism and other ills which soon followed victory.

This failure to get the period of Haig's leadership in correct perspective is not to be attributed wholly to ill-judged speeches such as the Paris one just considered. There have been other causes. The censorship during the war was one of them. It was a lesser cause, and there has been a tendency to exaggerate it. The screen of censorship was imperative. It always must be imperative in scientific warfare, increasing in strictness as an enemy's facilities for gaining and utilising military information increase. Effective censorship is of the very body armour of the modern fighting man. It is a concession the civilian population is bound to make to him. The screen was lifted too grudgingly after the war, and some of those who worked it at home did not perhaps know their business. That, however, is another matter, and is no argument against military censorship over all news affecting the safety of the troops during hostilities.

A far more potent cause lay in the huge nature of the struggle on the Western Front, the prolonged character of what was—and must have been even had a Napoleon been on the scene—a wearing-down grapple of resolute gigantic

conduct operations, however slight the indications of such distrust may be, the effect reacts instantly throughout the whole Army. This is more than ever true with troops, which, at the moment in question, were being subjected to great and severe demands upon their courage, endurance, and, above all, faith in their leaders.'—1914, by Viscount French, 2nd edition, pages 100-1 (Constable & Co.).

forces. There was a will to victory which laid and kept hold of whole nations in the west throughout the latter stages of conflict. Von Moltke in his work on the war of 1870-1871 remarks that 'The wars of the present day call whole nations to arms.' If true of fifty years ago, that is far more applicable to the European War 1914-1918.¹ 'Pacifism,' loudly advertised at times, was a very small thing as far as those nations were concerned. It was powerless as long as the issue remained in doubt.

Years of conflict on this mighty scale, offensive succeeding offensive, the two sides fairly well matched in resolution, in men and material and skill in trench warfare, with the initiative fluctuating—these produced something which was exceedingly hard to comprehend. Most people tired of trying to envisage and grasp it as a whole. They viewed it in detached parts, mere fragments, with the result that wrong notions as to strategy were prevalent.

Then, when the tide of war turned in the summer of 1918, the Allies passing from triumph to triumph, onlookers were led to believe that at last our strategists had learnt their lesson, exchanged unscientific for scientific methods. Our strategy, middling or muddled in 1916 and 1917, had grown inspired—we had entered on a Napoleonic or super-Napoleonic phase! That popular figure, the inspired war-winner, appeared on the stage. Sometimes he was embodied in Marshal Foch—though Foch was surely the last to make such a senseless claim, as his observations in the British Despatches indicate. At other times the war-winner was symbolised in the term unity of control—and was falsely claimed as son and heir of Versailles. As a fact Versailles—as far as the military side of it was concerned—produced not unity at all, but an abortive attempt at control by committee. The offspring of Versailles were stillborn.

¹ *The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71*. Translated by Archibald Forbes. Von Moltke adds: 'As long as nations exist distinct one from the other there will be quarrels that can only be settled by force of arms; but, in the interests of humanity, it is to be hoped that wars will become less frequent, as they become more terrible.'

But sterling as was the service of Foch—by removing the extreme peril of a separation of the French and British Armies—this as a complete explanation of how the war was won on the Western Front is grotesque. It is as if we were to found our views, say, of Wellington's strategy on the series of triumphant battles of the Pyrenees in which at last he routed the French under Soult and flung them out of the Peninsula: as if we were to discount his earlier head and spade work, voting the 1810 Torres Vedras lines—behind which largely he organised his Army—as prosaic, and most of the battles between then and 1813 as fruitless and a waste of life. Whereas actually there was an ordered, indispensable sequence in those events. The British could not have overwhelmed Soult's forces in 1813 and 1814 had not Wellington put great, patient generalship into those early and middle stages of his Peninsular Campaign.

Precisely the same sequence applies to the course of British arms on the Western Front.

Foch in his Introduction to *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches, December 1915—April 1919* attests in a noble sentence to 'the unswerving purpose which fashioned the British Army from 1917 onwards into a magnificent instrument of war.' He reminds us, for instance, of the work involved in the training of the troops, in the creation of special services to deal with the increasing number and variety of engines of modern warfare, in the making and repairing of lines of communications. These were one side only of the British Commander-in-Chief's constant work on the Western Front. Without them we could not have fought the great German Army in the middle stages of the war, and lowered its moral in 1917, as Ludendorff has frankly borne witness we did; still less could we have stopped its final onslaught on our lines at the struggles on the Somme and Lys in March and April 1918, and played the leading and decisive part in the offensive between August and November of that year. In his final Despatch, the Commander-in-Chief, under the heading 'A Single Great Battle,' shows in a few passages how his own series of victories

between the Battle of Amiens, August 8-13, 1918, and the Battle of the Sambre, November 1-11, 1918, were made possible and were gradually led up to by the wearing-down campaign of the preceding years. Those are illuminating passages ! True, we can reach his conclusions by a careful independent study of the Despatches generally. They are clear logical deductions which a reader with common sense may reach for himself unaided. But it is fortifying for those among us who never wavered in the conviction that costly offensives in 1916 and 1917 were necessary before the immense military power of Germany could be brought down in 1918 to have the truth set forth in perfectly simple terms through a master-mind in war ; through the strategist who wrought the weapon and who dealt the stroke. The passages are essential to any survey, if it is to be an intelligent one, of Haig's work in France, and to the feat of the British troops during this period. That part of the final Despatch which includes them will be printed in full for reference at the end of the book. A few sentences are quoted here, as they emphasise this point of capital importance : that the British Army's victory in 1918 was the unquestionable derivative of its training, fighting and strategy in the previous years.

'I think it desirable to comment briefly upon certain general features which concern the whole series of operations carried out under my command. I am urged thereto by the conviction that neither the course of the war itself nor the military lessons to be drawn therefrom can properly be comprehended, unless the long succession of battles commenced on the Somme in 1916 and ended in November of last year on the Sambre are viewed as forming part of one great and continuous engagement.

'To direct attention to any single phase of that stupendous and incessant struggle and seek in it the explanation of our success, to the exclusion or neglect of other phases possibly less striking in their immediate or obvious consequences, is in my opinion to risk the formation of unsound doctrines regarding the character and requirements of modern war.'

The Despatch points out that, taking the four and a half years of war on the Western Front as one continuous campaign, there are recognisable in it those general features and stages which mark other great conclusive struggles in history where the combatants have been fairly well matched.

First occurs the phase of deployment and manoeuvre, each side striving to get positions of vantage. Secondly, battle once joined, each strives by costly and hard fighting to wear down the strength of the opponent. The fighter's aim then is to pin the opponent to his position, whilst keeping in his own hands a strong reserve force by which he hopes presently to strike the decisive blow.

Thirdly, we reach the phase when the side that has suffered more in the wearing-down struggle must choose whether he shall break off the engagement and retire if he can, or whether he shall stake all on a last daring throw for victory. Napoleon, in this third phase, staked all when he launched his reserves at Waterloo; the corresponding effort of the German Army started with their thrust at the British on March 21, 1918, and closed with their hold-up on the Marne by the French with some American and British divisions in mid-July.

The Napoleonic throw was over in a matter of minutes, the German throw covered the best part of four months. Yet the feature of warfare was the same in both instances. The strategist will not overlook it because in the latter case the vast masses of troops the German leader was able to accumulate and spread for separate blows over a long battle-front spun out the effort and left the issue for months in doubt.

Despite Jomini, who saw in war not so much an exact science as 'a terrible and passionate drama,' there is an actual *science* of war, something known and proved; and these three distinct stages of campaign, frequently re-occurring, are an example of it. Neglecting to recognise this science of war, hostile critics and dull observers of our leadership in the field in 1916 and 1917 have gone far astray. They have seen this period in meaningless and incoherent portions, often recognised and praised nothing but the obvious

success at the close. The mistake is deplorable—it denies those who fought and fell in 1916 and 1917 merit for the ultimate victory. It is well known through conversations with not only the Commander-in-Chief but with those too who organised the campaigns with him that they hold exactly the contrary opinion.

The middle or wearing-down stage—*La période d'usure* Foch terms it¹—is touched on in several notable sentences in the final Despatch. Thus :

'In the stage of the wearing-out struggle losses will necessarily be heavy on both sides, for in it the price of victory is paid. If the opposing forces are approximately equal in numbers, in courage, in moral and in equipment, there is no way of avoiding payment of the price or of eliminating this phase of the struggle.'

Yet some perverse minds, truly ambitious in the original sense of the word, thought we might escape Foch's *période d'usure* by taking our Army from France, and employing it, somehow, to circumvent one of the lesser allies of Germany ! As early as January 1916, had not the Minister of Munitions already drawn up a plan for transferring the British Army as a whole from the Western Front to Salonica ? The project did not go beyond paper. There was a kindred school of thought in Germany, but it was not encouraged by strategists there. Discussing how England, at the close of 1915, could be defeated, General Emil von Falkenhayn remarks :

'We must rule out enterprises in the East where England can only be struck at indirectly . . . we can in no case expect to do anything of decisive effect on the course of the war, as the protagonists of an Alexander march to India or Egypt . . . are always hoping.' German strategists cultivated propaganda for the east, but militarily they concentrated on the west as soon as they were able after the fall of Russia. Napoleon's '*Cette vieille Europe m'ennuie*' made

¹ For believing in 'attrition' as an unavoidable feature of the struggle in the west, Sir William Robertson was often ridiculed and abused as a kind of monster even by critics who beslavered Foch with adulation.

no practical appeal to them. Neither did it to Haig or Foch, Joffre or Pétain.

The Despatch: 'The rapid collapse of Germany's military powers in the latter half of 1918 was the logical outcome,' as the Commander-in-Chief says, 'of the fighting of the previous two years. It would not have taken place but for that period of ceaseless attrition which used up the reserves of the German Armies, while the constant and growing pressure of the blockade sapped with more deadly insistence from year to year at the strength and resolution of the German people. It is in the great battles of 1916 and 1917 that we have to seek for the secret of our victory in 1918.'

August 8 to November 11, 1918, on the British Front is an unimaginable stage apart from *La période d'usure*. Trying to imagine it, we are only playing at war, out-Versailles-ing Versailles. We are mounting our victories, as a dreamer his castles, in the air.

But, it may be objected, the costly offensives of 1916 and 1917 did not always work out according to plan: the hoped-for break-through, for instance, in the first Battle of the Somme was not effected. It would have been a miracle had they always worked out according to plan. No reasoned defence of British or French strategy would make such an idiotic claim as that. Wellington, in a despatch written in 1808, declared that Vimeiro was the only battle in which, in his experience, all had worked out according to plan. 'To err is human,' on the battlefield distinctly; though the bitter civilian critics at home let it be known through 1916 and 1917 that it might be the divine province to forgive an occasional error by British commanders in the field—it was certainly not theirs.

Thus there was the example in April 1917 which we now recognise as infructuous—the Battle of Arras. It was a contribution of sorts to *La période d'usure*, but not in the form or on the ground which the British Army would have chosen had the decision been left to Haig's own judgment. This battle was mounted with care and foresight. It inflicted a startling defeat on the enemy. It drew off and used up his reserves,

Apart, however, from the major portion of the plan—a great French offensive on the Aisne, intended to roll up the German Armies—it was, we must admit, a blow struck somewhat in the air.¹ *En guerre, l'art ne consiste pas à frapper fort, ni à frapper souvent, mais à frapper juste.* There is something in that, for a platitude, and the blow in this case was scarcely *juste*. The British fighting man acted his part grandly at the Battle of Arras though he had but lately issued from the heavy work on the Somme, and time for some recuperation and training were thus denied him. He did all that his leaders and Allies could expect of him. Apart, however, from the capture of Vimy Ridge, the results of Arras were unsatisfying. Small wonder Ludendorff admits he could not discover their important strategic aim. Who could? With the Germans falling back from the Somme to the Hindenburg positions—a withdrawal foreseen and predicted by British G.H.Q.—the plan should not have been urged by Nivelle and warmly supported by our own War Cabinet and the French Government of the day. It would not have been undertaken by our leaders in the field but for their loyalty to the Alliance. They made no secret of their misgivings over the soundness of Nivelle's dazzling project. In a Flanders offensive, if only it could be undertaken early enough in the year, they had a much more promising venture. But they took up the task allotted to them in a spirit of, above everything, 'aimez loyauté'; and, once they had entered upon it, every generous French soldier and statesman who knows the facts will grant they stayed it out whole-heartedly.

There are still people, in and out of the Army, who cannot reconcile themselves to the unfortunate incident, and no wonder. Yet others will set this grand spirit of loyalty above almost every consideration: and it is hard not to sympathise largely with them.

¹ True, Ludendorff writes of the Battle of Arras, 1917, as 'a heavy defeat' for the German Army. But it could lead up to nothing, unless Nivelle succeeded on the Aisne. The Battle of Arras, March 28, 1918, was, rightly viewed, a far greater blow to Germany.

As to Vimy Ridge, Mr. Lloyd George, in a speech in the House of Commons in 1918, described it as 'that great bastion.' That was a claim amply justified. But one must add that the attack on Vimy was strongly discouraged by Nivelle and his Staff. They would not hear of it at first. The British Commander-in-Chief, his Chief of Staff and the Commander of the First Army insisted ; and, as a result, the Ridge was stormed by the gallant Canadian Corps under General Byng in General Horne's First Army. That is a truth which has been too long kept back. The present writer, in an article written in March 1918 for the April issue of the *Nineteenth Century and After*, drew attention to the value of that decision in view of the German offensive then starting ; though he did not know at the time that it had been reached in face of the French protest.

Nivelle was wrong over Vimy, as Foch was wrong absolutely about the manner in which the British should attack after the Battle of Amiens, and as Joffre was wrong in an extraordinary instance over the way the British should re-attack on the Somme early in July 1916. We shall examine these facts in their places. One feels, knowing now the facts well, that had not Haig's view prevailed in the 1916 and 1917 cases, we should have suffered gravely. But one is perfectly certain that had not Haig declined to take Foch's plan, instead of insisting on his own, which was incomparably superior, in August 1918, the result would have been deplorable.

It is amazing that the vast mass of the public throughout the British Empire have not yet heard of any of these events in the war. The discussion between the military leaders at Sarcus in August 1918 was one of the most momentous episodes in the history of Europe. And had not Haig there insisted on his own plan of breaking the German Army—a plan supremely skilful and deeply thought out by him and his Staff—the Allied cause would have suffered grievously indeed. Yet books and articles have been written, and speeches made, which show our leadership in France to have been a stupid, idea-less one till it was inspired by the Ally

—and the writers and the speakers, as well as the public they address, have remained in complete ignorance of that absolutely vital decision at Sarcus!

* * * * *

In part, then, through impulsive or maladroit speeches, and the veil of a doubtless imperative censorship, as well as through tenderness for the susceptibility of Allied feelings, still more through the vast prolonged character of the struggle, the plain truth about these middle and final stages has been perverted—and always perverted at the expense of the British Army or leader.

Three typical illustrations of common form perversion may be cited. They must be discussed in detail later in our narrative. Here they are touched on initially because they form part of the why and wherefore of the book, its argument indeed.

To begin with what is known, commonly, as 'Passchendaele,' the Flanders offensive of the summer and autumn of 1917. It can be granted there has been some excuse until recently¹ for the erroneous views prevalent about the great battle which started in June 1917 with Messines and Wytschaete and closed with the capture of the Passchendaele position five months later.

This Flanders fighting, including its preliminary at Messines in June 1917—and, logically, the popular success thore cannot be left out of it—was the bitterest prolonged offensive on the Western Front. It was very costly, though the casualty list was much below that of the earlier wearing-out battle on the Somme. It was carried on amidst conditions of discomfort and suffering incredible except to those who know that churned-up wilderness of mud in bad weather. It did not secure a decision. These facts created a prejudice against the whole operation. Its strategy was condemned. The word was passed round that 'Passchendaele' amounted to nothing but the barren capture of part of a ridge over-

¹ Major-General Sir John Davidson, M.P., in a masterly and authoritative article in the *Nineteenth Century and After* for February 1921, did all in his power to put the public right in the matter.

looking the Ypres salient and the reckless expenditure of life.

Such was the widespread impression about this offensive ; an impression common to those who could not at the time, or whilst the war lasted, be informed of the motives for the battle, and sometimes even depressing anxious statesmen and others who did know well about its origin.

The Flanders offensive was undertaken by the British Army soon after the abandonment by the French Government of Nivelle's project on the Aisne. There was complete agreement between the Allies, at the Conference in Paris on May 4-5, 1917, that the initiative must pass forthwith from the French to the British, and that the latter were to engage the enemy. It was to be a kind of strategic somersault. The French were then to play the subsidiary part. The Nivelle arrangement was reversed—except that the junior partner was not placed under the direction of the senior. 'Unity of command' under a generalissimo, entered upon a few months before with an excess of enthusiasm (by the Governments concerned), was hastily thrust away—'a transient and embarrassed phantom,' Disraeli might indeed have styled it.

The British forthwith were to play the part of active partner. They were to strike hard, and keep on striking, so that the French Army might have a reasonable time in which to recover its shattered moral.

This could not be stated in 1917, or for a long while afterwards ; which accounts, considerably, for the way public opinion at home misjudged the operations in Flanders when it found they did not lead to a decision in the west.

The French had suffered so severely through the strain at Verdun, and through their previous struggles at a time when we had not yet a large enough army to aid them fully, that they were not fit to engage in another major operation after the spring of 1917. It is indeed exceedingly doubtful whether the French Army should have been thrown into the great Aisne battle, even assuming that Nivelle's plan was, in other respects, sound. And that was one of the reasons

why the most authoritative British military opinion expressed doubt about the plan ; though once it had been adopted, Haig did, without reserve, everything in his power to make it a success. He abandoned his own plan for a joint thrust in the north, he waiting loyally on his French colleague, and he thoroughly engaged the enemy's attention at Arras.

So weakened was the French Army after the failure of the Aisne plan that the French Commander-in-Chief—Pétain, who had succeeded Nivelle on May 15, 1917—deemed it imperative that the British should at once resume the offensive, in order to prevent the enemy from striking hard. Pétain shortly after he had assumed command visited Haig, and urged this course ; and he himself set out on a kind of propaganda mission, visiting during three months various parts of his line, and prompting his officers to restore discipline and steadiness. His tour lasted two months, and in the course of it he addressed officers of 100 divisions.

Pétain's mission was thoroughly practical and patriotic. Great credit is due to him. But it is absurd to pretend that the French Army speedily recovered its strength—though some writers have declared it was absolutely fit again in June 1917. For one thing, new regulations had to be made by which French soldiers were given by right ten days' leave every four months ; the effect of which was that thereafter some 350,000 French soldiers were invariably on leave against 80,000 British soldiers.

In his final report on the American Expeditionary Forces in France, General Pershing, writing of this period, says : 'The relatively low strength of the German forces on the Western Front led the Allies with much confidence to attempt a decision. . . . The failure caused a serious reaction especially in French morale, both in the army and throughout the country, and attempts to carry out extensive or combined operations were indefinitely suspended.'

General Pershing makes some rather advanced claims in regard to his fine troops and their achievement on the Western Front, but his frankness is manly and useful. He indicates that French moral by no means recovered entirely

after the Spring offensive of 1917. He considers that the success of the French stroke of July 18, 1918, on the Marne was due to two divisions of American troops put in, and elsewhere he says he was convinced that the attack in the Argonne could only be successfully undertaken by his own men—the others not being fit for it.

The British, then, had to engage the enemy incessantly through 1917—though they had themselves only just emerged from the Battle of Arras, and though they had been fighting through the past winter on the Ancre. They could not expect, and they did not obtain, much further aid from the French Army during 1917.

Could we, at this point, have safely left the enemy alone ; or sought to arrest any attack of his on our Ally by means of sundry small local operations without strategic aim ? No : we could not possibly have saved the situation by sitting still after Arras—and ‘ waiting for something to turn up.’ That Pétain was right in his desire the British should not relax, and that Haig was right not to relax but to strike hard—there is nothing clearer in all the war than that. It has since been shown by Ludendorff. He states in *My War Memories* that the great Flanders offensive by the British interfered with his plans. For example :—

‘ I was myself being put to a terrible strain. The state of affairs in the west appeared to prevent the execution of our plans elsewhere.’

Russia in revolution was, naturally, threatening to pass out of the war. America had scarcely started—though there were voices which at this time urged the British Commander-in-Chief to ‘ wait for America.’¹ No wonder the Stockholm conspiracy in the summer of 1917 alarmed firm supporters of the Entente.

At no time during the three years with which this book is concerned was the Allied outlook as dark as after the Aisne

¹ According to M. Painlevé, Minister for War in 1917, Pétain, when importunate people called for attacks, replied, ‘ J’attends les Américains et les tanks.’ But if, additionally, the British Commander-in-Chief had awaited the Americans and the tanks, the French Army might soon have been overwhelmed at that period.

débâcle. General Gouraud has declared that the most critical period for the Allied cause was not when the Germans struck at the British on March 21, 1918, and not when they struck at the French on May 27, 1918; the worst period, he frankly admits, was after the Nivelle failure. At least one French division was in open mutiny, and, as we shall find, many others were seriously infected by the 'pacifist' campaign then raging in France—a campaign against which Nivelle had early in 1917 tried to induce the French Government to move. At the Aisne some troops told off for the attack never went over the top; and the II^e Corps Colonial speedily retired from action. The losses at the battle there in April were considerable, but they were much exaggerated at the time and later, even by people behind the military scenes.

In this connection one remembers a story of how the British Commander-in-Chief heard an early estimate of the French casualties—and revised it. Somebody at G.H.Q. announced that the French stated their casualties at 120,000—in fact those appear to have actually been the figures of G.Q.G. The C.-in-C. remarked, 'Halve that number.' Later, it was almost halved!

Two classes of critics have refused to listen to any arguments justifying the stroke in Flanders. One consists of those whose *métier* is to upbraid 'brass-hats,' 'red-tabs,' 'cavalry generals,' and so forth. To them Passchendaele was a senseless slaughter of men for no purpose whatever. Then there is, or was, a sect with ideas of its own as to how the war ought to have been handled after the French breakdown in April-May 1917 at the Aisne. Its students graduated in the eastern school, and they too are hard to convert.

'East is East, and West is West,
And never the twain shall meet,

applies aptly to them. This is the west-weary sect so observed during the war, with, as first article in its creed through 1917 and till October 1918, 'I believe in the impenetrability of the Hindenburg Line.' They disbelieved in *La période d'usure*. They wished for a strategy more

romantic, as well as speedier and humaner. If still they take that view, and see Passchendaele in its light, at least they should turn to Ludendorff and read what he says of the fighting in Flanders. It is quite as important as what he says of August 8, 1918, the 'black day' for Germany. Ludendorff tells us of the terrible experiences of his troops through that offensive and of the costly results.

Before that ordeal closed, 78 German divisions pinned to our front had to pass through it. That it played a great part in wearing away the moral of the German Army cannot in reason now be questioned, whether we believe or not in the necessity of attrition. A German soldier, Herr Lowinsohn, has told us of the state of the army during its retreat in 1918. Its 'moral strength' had gone—'the retreat took the last atom of resistance out of it' (*Die Revolution an der Westfront*). But the sapping of that moral strength did not start in August 1918 when the British struck near Amiens. The disease was active, as Ludendorff's pages prove, through the autumn of 1917. It was at best only partially arrested for a time when in the spring and early summer of 1918 Ludendorff was able to bring fresh divisions from the East and attack the Allies. Even then Ludendorff had to complain of the deteriorated discipline of his troops, especially in the Lys offensive in April. They failed, he tells us, to make the most of their opportunities on several occasions through weakened moral. The disease, which had weakened the frame of his great army, broke out again in the summer of 1918, and brought quickly the close.

Is this only a typical British view—a John Bull view? Well, those who think it is should glance at one passage in a little book—not otherwise well informed—entitled *La Bataille des Flandres in 1917*, by Général Verroaux. In his final chapter, 'Les Conséquences Lointaines de la Bataille,' writing of the two great German offensives on the British in March and April 1918, he says :—

'Le front britannique, percé en plusieurs points entre la Lys et l'Oise, sera débordé dans les Flandres et devra reculer. Partout le monde, l'Allemand sera alors considéré

comme bien près du suprême triomphe. Il n'en sera rien cependant. A ce moment apparaîtra l'usure irrémédiable provoquée par les coups répétés qui lui auront été portés dans cette rude bataille.

'L'héroïsme du Tommy de Langemarck, de Poelcapelle, des bois d'Inverness et du Polygone, de la tour d'Hamlet, de Passchendaele ; la constance du poilu de Bixschoote et du Saint-Jeansbeke ; la fière attitude du soldat belge dans les marais de Blankaert n'auront pas été inutiles. Aussi, lorsque la ruée allemande s'arrêtera devant Béthuno, devant Arras, devant Amiens, devant Compiègne, devant Villers-Cotterets, devant Meaux, devant Rhems et devant Épernay, ce sera parce que tous les camps, toutes les casernes de l'Allemagne auront été peu à peu vidés.

'Donc, si l'on veut tirer quelque enseignement de cette dure et longue période, il convient de remarquer que la perfection de la technique moderne n'est pas encore venue à bout de la constance, cette vertu première des chefs et des soldats.

'Rien ne vaut mieux contre un adversaire tenace que d'être plus tenace que lui. Ce fut dans cette guerre le secret de la victoire.'

It is obviously, and yet profoundly, true what this writer says. He gets down to the root here at least whilst so many critics, wishing above all not to be obvious or superficial, are all the time scratching at the surface. The idea that we could—somehow, somewhere, sometime—have disposed of the German Army without really *fighting* the German Army, without lowering its moral, without baulking its projected plans, without using up by constant and terrible pressure its great resources—what is that but imagination informed not as imagination should be by fact but by fancy ?

Had the leader of our troops adopted the rôle of a Fabius Cunctator in 1917, when his Allies were in deep waters, and when Pétain was urging him to strike and keep on striking, Foch would not have been in the position on November 17, 1918, to pay his tribute to the British Armies as 'Decisive factors in final German defeat.'

CHAPTER II

OUR LEADERSHIP IN FRANCE, 1916-1918: A PRELIMINARY SURVEY (*Continued*)

THE German offensive in March and April 1918 north and south of the Somme, and in the latter month on the Lys :

Was ever a great battle so persistently misrepresented and misunderstood at home as that of our Fifth and Third Armies, not only in the ten days or a fortnight during which it raged, but for months, years, after ? And this though the attack was accurately foreseen and predicted, not, as stated in Parliament, by the Versailles experts but by our G.H.Q. ; and though the main cause of the catastrophe which followed was as well known to statesmen at home as to leaders at the front—namely, that the enemy was able to strike the Fifth and Third Armies with an overwhelming numerical superiority of divisions.

It is mathematically proved that the British Army in France in March 1918, considering the new and ill-defended length of line it had just taken up, was stinted of sufficient men to meet the attack successfully. The figures of manpower, stated, examined, debated from every standpoint, have put that beyond question. We do know now that the men needed to hold up the attack—the biggest thing in German history, Ludendorff described it to the Kaiser—in March between Arras and La Fère were withheld. That is something gained. It is a relief to be able to stand on firm earth at least there. Yet the reasons for withholding the men till the fully expected blow had been delivered, when they had to be rushed in a home panic on to the scene—and the military service age at home raised (nominally) to 50—have never been frankly stated. They have been gingerly evaded, or clouded over by skilled rhetoric,

Reservation, too, seems to have been made a fine art of in this connection. An example is worth giving here, for it is to the point. On October 21, 1918, there was published in the *London Gazette* the Despatch of the Commander-in-Chief dated General Headquarters, July 20, 1918, relating to the German offensive of March and April. And certain references to the man-power problem and the strength of divisions—which must be discussed in a later chapter—were made in the preliminary passages, but censored at home. By October 21, all risk of the Germans profiting by these references was of course over. The enemy was retreating hastily from the river Selle positions, and was speedily to make his last despairing stand at the Battle of the Sambre. In effect, *actum est*! However, as the war was still in being, it may be a debatable point of sorts whether the powers at home were or were not justified in withholding for a season the passages. Let us, for the sake of peace, concede that censorship was reasonable. October 21, 1918, however, is one thing, the late autumn of 1919 is another; and yet at the latter period, when an opportunity was taken to issue the Despatch of July 20, 1918, together with the 1916 and 1917 Despatches, in book form, with an Introduction as magnanimous as it is modest by Foch, permission was granted only on the explicit understanding that the text should be that of the *London Gazette*. That is—the offending passages must still be omitted! Nor is that all. There were, as we shall find later, similar omissions, due to the same cause, in the Despatch published as a supplement to the *London Gazette* of January 8, 1918, and in the Despatch published as a supplement to the *London Gazette* when virtually the war was over! These, too, were not to be furnished in 1919.

The public more than a year after the Armistice was not entitled to know what the Commander-in-Chief stated in his Despatch of December 25, 1917, concerning the great Flanders offensive of that year.

Truth in this world, said a cynic, must wait—she is used to it. The wait in this instance strikes one as unconscionably long.

To return to March 1918. That the British Army was undermanned for the heavy work before it is not in dispute. Early in February it had relieved the French by taking over the front between the Omignon river and Barisis. The Supreme War Council at Versailles, in its session of January-February, decided that the British should take over the line as far as the river Ailette, but this proposition was—with common sense—postponed through a friendly understanding between the British Commander-in-Chief and Pétain, the French Commander-in-Chief. By the extension to Barisis on the Oise, the British held 125 miles of active front, and at no point could this be described as a non-vital front. It was a hard-bitten front from end to end, with virtually only one spot worth mentioning—the devastated Somme area—where our line could fall back any distance without the gravest consequences.

It had a dangerous point where the Portuguese held the line on the Lys.

Yet the bayonet and sabre strength of the British Army in France had dropped from 612,000 at the end of 1917 to 582,000 at the time of the German offensive. These figures speak for themselves. The shrinkage of our forces had been brought to the notice of the Government. At the meeting of the Supreme War Council, January 30-February 3, 1918, at which the extension of the British front to the river Ailette was ordained, the Commander-in-Chief had called attention to the dwindling strength of his divisions. We had 57 divisions with which to hold the front to Barisis; and 47 of them were below establishment. He predicted that at this rate we should have to reorganise by reducing the number of battalions from 12 to 9. The result in February and March would be a total of 600 battalions instead of 741.¹

The warning fell on closed ears. In February, all the

¹ In spite of the oncoming German offensive and the recent extension of the British front to Barisis, our bayonet and sabre strength on March 20, 1918, the day before the German assault, was actually 26,000 below what it had been at the end of 1916.

British—other than Dominion—divisions in France were reduced from 12 to 9 battalions.¹

As to the strength of the Germans in France, they are stated to have had 192 divisions against the Allied total of 169; approximately 1,514,000 rifles against the Allied 1,398,000.² For the initial stages of the assault on March 21 against the Third and Fifth Armies, the Germans seem to have employed 61 divisions—36 in front lines, 22 in close reserve, 3 in Army reserve. Between March 21 and April 9 Ludendorff flung 73 divisions into the battle against the British front. By May 1, 1918, this number had increased to 76 divisions. These totals leave out of account the Battle of the Lys.

Against this force Haig was able, somehow, to muster 45 divisions, including 3 of cavalry. He could not strip bare the rest of his line in France and Flanders. As it was, he took a grave risk by drawing from his forces north of Arras, with a German offensive already being mounted on the Flanders front.

There were other formidable problems facing him at the time the Germans struck their blow along some fifty miles of front between Croisilles and the Oise. To take over the fresh line to Barisis meant thinning out the number of guns he was able to defend his front with. Also, the addition to his line necessitated a great deal of fresh and heavy work in making roads and railways and reorganising the methods of defence therein. The front taken over by the British had not been left in at all an efficient state. It needed fresh wiring, trenches and communication trenches. The Allies had been holding it largely by a series of posts without continuous trenches. These matters are indisputable, but they should not be dwelt on too much, otherwise they tend to divert attention from the master difficulty—shortage of man-power at the most dangerous period for Allied arms

¹ Or 13 to 10, if we include the pioneer battalion.

² The figures in these three lines are quoted from page 19, vol. iv. of *A History of the Peace Conference in Paris* (Hodder and Stoughton). Edited by H. W. V. Temperley. Their source, however, is not known to the present writer. The figures which follow them are authoritative.

since 1914. If we allow ourselves to be deflected from that, to be cozened into theories as to what might have been done to avert the German stroke by some flash of genius or the magic of unified control, or the bare mention of a general reserve, everything goes out of perspective. The black ox on the plain becomes then the fly upon the window-pane. We view the struggle then as some far-fetched Easterner or other conjurer viewed it; marching over the Alps like Hannibal with his vinegar, to wipe out Austria early in 1917, or dispensing with the British Expeditionary Force in France and landing instead one night on the German shores on the Baltic to force a decision there.

The man-power figures transcend other considerations as far as concerns the German offensives in March and April 1918. We must not lose sight of them.

* * * * *

So the British Army was left with its divisions below establishment, and when the enemy's blow fell on the day it was due the result was the retreat of the Fifth Army and the Third Army across the Somme battlefields. So much is sun-clear: likewise our heavy losses in men, guns, and all manner of material. The calamity which befell the Fifth Army—what was it but invited by the negligence of the civil power at home?

In dwelling on the Fifth Army's disaster we ought not to overlook the hard struggle its troops made. Too much stress has been laid on the disaster, too little has been laid on the great fight it put up. Pétain stated at a meeting of Allied statesmen and soldiers at Compiègne on March 25 that the Fifth by then had lost the form of an organised fighting whole, that it had ceased to exist. That was neither a staunch remark nor a correct one. As a fact no British victory in this or any war offers instances of devotion and endurance more moving than scores of those which mark the hard fighting retreat south and north of the Somme. Through the weight of the onslaught, the line was pierced and rent. The Fifth Army was repeatedly near the breaking-point. Nor was the

Third Army far removed from it.¹ In fact in one instance the Third Army was in extreme peril, the most dangerous occasion in the whole offensive.² But the enemy was not able to get home with his decisive blow. It was a defeat—it was not a decision. And this is not playing with words, it is drawing a legitimate distinction; for a decision was precisely what the enemy had mounted his battle for. It was not a wearing-down effort but a throw for final victory by destroying a large part of the British line and separating the Allied forces. Our troops prevented that.

Clausewitz says that a great retreating army will only retreat like a wounded lion. Surely that description fits well enough the Fifth—as it fits too those shattered and worn remnants of the Fifth which two months later by a shocking blunder were conveyed to a 'quiet' sector on the Aisne to be suddenly attacked by the Germans on May 27, 1918. The lion in both instances used his paw when the hunters came within its range.

It has been said that 'unity of command' started with the disadvantage of a complete defeat. It is unfair to our troops to leave it in that form; for 'unity of command' started also with this very solid advantage—the British Army, by the time that unity was arranged, had, by immense sacrifice, dashed the German hopes of decision.³ To appreciate this, a reader need not seek the opinion of statesman or strategist, French, British, or other. He can found his own judgment

¹ No invidious comparisons should be drawn between Fifth and Third Armies. They serve no worthy purpose, and those that have been drawn are unintelligent.

² This may or may not have been the most critical day for the Allied cause in France during 1918, and we may have to go back to the first Battle of Ypres in 1914 to discover its equal. But perhaps the most disagreeable morning for our Higher Command was that of April 28, 1918, when the staggering news was received at G.H.Q. through the French Corps concerned that the Germans had taken the Scherpenberg and the entire range of Mont Rouge—Mont Noir heights! It turned out incorrect. The story, ridiculous but true, will be given when we reach the Battle of the Lys.

³ Moreover, scarcely had it started, even nominally, when on March 28, 1918, Horns in the Battle of Arras inflicted a crushing and decisive defeat on the Seventeenth German Army.

on sources of information open to every one. An authoritative narrative of the March offensive will be given in the second volume of this book with fresh facts. But its basis can always remain that of the Despatch of July 20, 1918, which serves for our immediate purpose.

Reading and rereading that tremendous drama of manhood, the broad outlines presently become clear enough ; and the achievement in retreat of those corps in the southern part of the line, where the disparity in strength was greatest, must appeal to every reader with a spark of generosity. Their exhausted divisions are seen wasting and wearing away till some of them shrink to the proportions of a brigade. Yet always there is some unit or other of indomitable courage to ward off the enemy's decisive stroke. At first we read with a dull sense of oppression as one defensive zone or strong point after another is resolutely contested by this division, brigade, or battalion, held throughout a day or night despite onslaught after onslaught by an opponent always in superior force, only to be abandoned the next. What good was it for the 21st Division to keep Epéhy firm against every attack on March 21, or for the 24th Division farther south to hold out at Le Verguier, if the battle zone was to be swept through inevitably at other sectors so that the whole line must retire that night or next morning ; the same episodes of forlorn hopes, of dogged resistance at one spot mingled with retreats precipitated by massed enemy attacks at another near by being repeated through the days of—apparently—unavailing opposition ? The battle zone ultimately to be penetrated everywhere, to be carried everywhere. Canal and river withdrawn across, merely to prove temporary expedients of resistance against fresh enemy onslaughts and accumulating masses wherever a stand is made, a great fight put up for a few hours. The oppression insists as one reads how, in this huge confused struggle, scarcely have two corps or divisions forced apart regained touch with one another than the same signals of peril appear in a neighbouring part of the retreating line.

Then there occurs and recurs, after the first days of the

storm, the spectacle of a band of stragglers being hastily collected and improvised to fill a gap or restore a dangerous situation by a gallant counter-attack. But all the time, whether the position is critical or whether it is temporarily relieved, the resistless tendency is always westwards, backwards.

That in the main is what we gather from a first study of the battle, with a few gleams of encouragement north of the Somme, where the Third Army with its somewhat better resources holds the line ; but with, virtually, none to the south, where the Fifth Army is struck at by an overwhelming force in men and guns.

But the narrative is grandly worth returning to and dwelling over. There is nothing in our patriotic literature, prose or poetry, better to read than this story of the Third and Fifth Armies' fighting retreat. The interest is enhanced by each reading. It is a superb study in sacrifice. It throws light on the courage and chivalry of—incontestably—the *élite* of our race.

When one takes up the thread for the second or third time, that earlier oppression wears off. The struggle grows into a more coherent whole. Certain great truths shine out. One recognises that the Fifth Army, in spite of its inability to stand against the weight of the attack, was never deprived of its resisting spirit. It no doubt included divisions which were relatively ineffectual from the outset. But even allowing for this, and for certain errors or departure from instructions to which the Despatch was bound to refer, the conclusion is irresistible : a retreat involving heavy losses in men and material was fated.

No valour or resource in the field could in March 1918 have made up for the failure of the members of the War Cabinet to supply our Army in France with the requisite strength of divisions.

* * * * *

By April 1 the offensive was dying down. It revived somewhat on April 4 and 5¹ on our front, then ceased.

¹ Ludendorff says it was over by the 4th.

The Germans had shot their bolt, they were in grave difficulties over their communications, and our own line south of the Somme had grown stable like that on the north of the river.

Did we owe this to hard fighting intervention on our behalf of the French troops, as has so often been stated ?

Before answering the question, it is well to say a few words in order to guard oneself against charges or suspicion of mischief-making. Mischief-making between Allies is as odious after war has ended as it is insane whilst war is going on. Nothing would induce any responsible person to engage in such a hateful occupation. Nor is there the least occasion, as far as the British and French Armies are concerned, to create ill-feeling by claiming for either between 1914 and 1918 more than its fair share of achievement : obviously there is abundance for both, in full measure and brimming over. We still do not know as much as we ought of French achievement in the first part of the war ; of their fierce struggles in the battles at Arras and Albert in 1914, and on the Yser. Our thoughts then were fixed on the British Expeditionary Force, a small army struggling for its life under the voluntary system, and with the nation's munitions resources undeveloped. But we know that the French held a very long line of front ; that their casualties were exceedingly heavy ; that they held the fort till we could play our part with an army on the scale of a great European Power both as regards men and war material of all sorts. We know what the French did in the first great Allied offensive—the Champagne battle—and how under Pétain at Verdun in 1916 they held up the enemy for nearly five months till the Allies together could strike on the Somme and relieve that fierce pressure. Then and later and all through, French pride in arms is justified and acknowledged in this country.

But no good service whatever, no lasting service, is done to the Entente by affecting that they ' saved ' us on the Somme or Lys in 1918. A quick-witted nation like the French is sure to see through such dull hypocrisy, and in the end it will cause more ill-feeling than stating the simple truth.

How, apart from the fact that the Germans had outmarched their supplies, was the position restored on the front of the Fifth Army and the line made stable early in April? We must examine the facts, and state them frankly, authoritatively.

On March 23, Pétain and Haig met at Dury, the latter's temporary headquarters a few miles south of Amiens. They discussed the grave position and agreed that the Fifth Army must hold the line of the Somme as long as possible, or until the arrival of 6 French divisions under General Pellé at Guiscard, which lay some three miles within the French sphere and a little north-east of the wooded heights about Noyon. The French Commander-in-Chief also reckoned that, on about March 30, 6 more French divisions would begin to arrive at Montdidier. They would be commanded by General Humbert and both of those forces would be under General Fayolle.

Unfortunately, concentration would be—considering the imminence of the peril—a slow process, for these reinforcements were coming from a distant part of the French line, Alsace. The only French reserves available speedily for the Somme area were at that time in the Reims area. The French command would not consider the question of moving those up, as a great German offensive was still expected by the French in that quarter. On March 24 the British Chief of Staff met General Fayolle—who had arrived to take command of the French divisions south of the British—at Villers-Bretonnoux. The line of the Somme had by then been forced at several spots, and the British were falling back but fighting hard. General Fayolle did not hold out hopes of any fresh French troops being on the scene till March 28—an ominous outlook indeed.

At this meeting it was arranged that all the British troops south of the Somme should be placed under French leadership forthwith. The British Commander-in-Chief rightly felt that this ought to lead to closer co-operation between the two Armies, a vital consideration at such a time.

Fayolle, for his part, stated his willingness, pending the

arrival of reserves, to order a counter-attack by the French troops which were already on the spot, in conjunction with the Fifth Army. Accordingly on March 25 orders for a counter-attack were given. But none took place. For one thing, most of the French troops that were coming up by 'bus had only about 50 rounds of small-arm ammunition apiece, and were without their guns—and cookers. Consequently their commanders would not throw them into the fight, but marched them away. These men, who were dropping in piecemeal, consisted of certain local French reserves. Under cover of British cavalry they did help, in union with the retreating divisions of our IIIrd Corps—which was then rapidly extending southward—to keep the line against the enemy. Every unit or fraction of a unit had some use at such a time by filling gaps in the thin, lengthening line; but it was no more than that.

Had the plan been carried out at the start of the battle which the two Commanders-in-Chief had previously agreed to—namely, that certain French reserve divisions should be at once available in case of an attack by the enemy in this quarter¹—the result might have been very different. That would have been something like reinforcement for the undermanned Fifth Army south of the Somme, on, say, March 22. Unfortunately, as we have seen, Pétain still believed the Germans were going to launch a big attack about Reims; and the French Government was extremely anxious about this. The French Intelligence insisted that the stroke against the British was but a diversion, or preliminary to this coming greater onslaught on the French Army.

We shall find that this view—a perfectly honest but wholly mistaken one—continued powerfully to influence the French generals and French Government even after the offensive against the Fifth and Third Armies was over, and the enemy had switched off to the later offensive against the First and Second British Armies in the Lys valley. It was in fact not till April 10 that Foch told the British Commander-

¹ For the arrangement of mutual support between Pétain and Haig, see Vol. II. Chapter II.

in-Chief that he was now convinced the main attack was against us! This chiefly accounts for the slowness with which French reserves came, in the case of both these enemy thrusts, to our support.

At 11 p.m. on March 24 the two Commanders-in-Chief again met at Dury and discussed the position. That interview between leaders of armies was truly one of the most pregnant of great results or decision of any in the war. Its nature will be referred to presently. Meanwhile, it is enough to say that it did not alter the situation as regards the immediate need of French reserves to assist the retreating Fifth Army.

From this date it becomes clear that the stories about French reserves hurrying on to the scene, detraining, and stopping the onslaught of the enemy are without foundation.¹ Ludendorff, whose chronicle is serious, does not deal in them. Hindenburg, in the lighter vein, says, 'The French appeared and with their massed attacks and skilful artillery saved the situation for the Allies and themselves.' That is like his banter about the French coming up at the Battle of the Lys annoyed to find that the British had just lost Mont Kemmel.²

What happened south of the Somme, after the meetings on March 24, was that on March 26, by agreement, the withdrawal of our shattered but hard-fighting IIIrd Corps of the Fifth Army began, and the French troops were left to take over its ground. A glance at the map³ at once clears up

¹ 'The speed with which the French reserves were brought up is one of the most remarkable feats of organisation in the war.'—Mr. Lloyd George, in the House of Commons, April 2, 1918 (see *Hansard*). But too much should not be made of this at the Prime Minister's expense; for at that time it would have been quite wrong to state the hard facts.

² As to Kemmel, by the way, Hindenburg's history would have been more trustworthy had he recalled the action of the French on November 1, 1914, instead of April 26, 1918. On the former date, thanks to the co-operation of Foch, the XVIth French Corps came up just in time to support our IIIrd Corps and Cavalry in the Wytschaete-Messines area, and prevent Mont Kemmel from falling most probably into the hands of the Germans.

³ Map 6. German Offensive on the Somme, March 21, 1918. *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches*.

the position. It shows that, on March 26 and 27, the British were still occupying the Rosières line: that the French were slightly west of Roye on the former day, whilst on the latter they had been pressed back as far as Montdidier, about ten miles south-west of Roye.

There is no evidence in the map of the stabilising of the British line by French troops—but quite the contrary.

The British Army had to meet its own need in this German offensive. That is the fact. Between March 21 and April 19, 1918, the British had to sustain a series of tremendous attacks by 106 German divisions—first in the Somme, then in the Lys offensive. Looking into the evidence, one utters a falsehood if one denies that.

It is of course true that in the case of the first offensive the French troops on the British right, and the reserves there when they arrived and could be put in, were essential. Obviously, the Allied line at the close of the month could not have remained stable without the presence and co-operation of the French troops. It must be remembered—though it has usually been forgotten by critics—that at the close of this battle the line from the Oise south of La Fère to the Somme at Hamel was about double the length of the line originally held by the Fifth Army. Obviously therefore the French divisions, when they gradually began to arrive, were indispensable for manning large portions of the new line.

But the point is that they distinctly did not in the most critical days come up, take over the line south of the Somme, and effect stabilisation. The story that they did so is untrue and mischievous. One regrets that Mangin, who led the Tenth French Army with *éclat* in the Allied advance in 1918, should have slid into this mistake; declaring that after the Battle of the Lys, which virtually closed, as we know, with the loss of Mont Kemmel by his countrymen, '*Les troupes françaises, par deux fois, avaient rétabli la situation.*'

When our line stiffened and grew firm at the close, it did so largely¹ through the divisions which at grave risk had

¹ Of course we must not overlook the very important fact that the Germans by this time were in great difficulties over their communications.

been contributed by our Second and First Armies farther north, and thanks to *the tremendous blow which the First Army under General Horne had dealt the enemy's Seventeenth Army on March 28 on the north bank of the Scarpe near Arras.*

That stroke was decisive. It put a close to Ludendorff's hopes of a break-through by his first offensive. A little later he switched off to his attack on the Lys.¹

After the German stroke, nearer two than one hundred thousand British troops were rushed to France. Why was the whole of this force withheld from the British Commander-in-Chief till the expected German stroke fell on the Third and Fifth Armies? Was it fear of a German invasion of the British Isles? Such an argument addressed to the Navy would have invited ridicule. Was it because the Government pinned its faith to a general reserve administered by an international committee of Allied Powers? Hardly, for that scheme had wilted away by, at any rate, the end of February. Was it that the Government still hoped to launch a great attack against Austria or Turkey and decide the war by that strategy? Surely not, after the declaration of Clémenceau at Versailles and the disapproval of French military leaders, who were well aware of the mighty effort Germany was preparing against the Allies on the Western Front.

¹ As a preliminary for his Lys offensive Ludendorff was obviously right in striking at Arras on March 28. Success there would have given him not only Vimy Ridge but the Loreto spur and the high ground, which was of immense importance. Had he succeeded indeed on March 28 at Arras, our position on the Lys would have been extraordinarily difficult—anybody who knows the ground will at once recognise that. But, after his failure at Arras, was it wise for Ludendorff to strike on the Lys on April 9? This point has not been touched on, as yet, by Ludendorff or any other authoritative writer on the war. It was believed at the time in this country that we were on our beam ends when the Germans attacked on the Lys, and Haig issued his famous order to the British troops. But as a fact we were in a much more uncomfortable situation on March 24 during the Somme offensive. The case would have been different indeed if Ludendorff's Seventeenth Army had succeeded in gaining the high ground north of Arras on March 28 the ground that largely commanded the French coal-fields and the British position on the Lys. It is virtually impossible to attach too high a value to the decisive British victory on March 28.

Is it not likelier that fear of casualties induced the authorities to withhold the troops needed to man our 125 miles of fighting front in France at this period ? The present writer, whilst crossing from Boulogne to Folkestone in 1917, was struck by an observation made to him by a member of the Government who must have been particularly familiar with such a matter. The writer remarked that we needed more men for our heavy work on the Western Front. The Minister replied that the question of man-power was indeed growing serious : 'but,' he added, 'when we do find the men, they are lost.'

Thus the vague idea may have been to keep down casualties by preserving the men at home, until March 21, 1918, proved this to be disastrous.

However, all we know for sure is that the necessary troops were withheld : though, at the same time, the Government through its representatives at Versailles, at the close of January 1918, was favouring the extension of the British front to the river Ailette.

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We now turn to a third myth of the war, and of how victory was reached : namely, that 'unity of command' won it by at last substituting for the haphazard and costly strokes of 1916 and 1917 a strategic plan, thought out by one brain and informed by true military genius.

This has become with many people an *idée fixe*. Those obsessed by it see all previous British work and strategy on the Western Front as Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times* saw life, 'a muddle, aw a muddle.' The fact that by overdoing justice, it does less than justice to that gallant soldier, Foch, and infamous injustice to the British Commander-in-Chief, has been overlooked. The personal side of the matter is, admittedly, a subsidiary one. We want the truth for reasons far more important to the nation than any concerning the merits of this or that leader in the field. We want to know whether we had or had not military intelligence and character fit to direct the great citizen-army during the most

critical years in our history. Naturally, if we had not, we were—and are—in a bad and humiliating plight. We should be fools then if we were not pessimists. The Dominions, who nobly gave of their best in the struggle, well might they then regard the Mother Country with misgivings. They would hardly be in the mood again, supposing we were in difficulties with a Foreign Power, to risk putting their men under British leadership in the field. They sent overseas to our aid between nine hundred thousand and a million men to be placed under the command of a leader chosen by the British Government.

The Commander-in-Chief is chosen and employed by the Government. The Government is answerable to the public for selecting the very best man for this post of supreme responsibility who can be discovered, a post on which the destiny of the State may depend—as depend during those years in the principal seat of war it verily did. The Government may, in seeking and selecting the man for this post, make a mistake, which can be condoned provided it be speedily rectified. But what conceivable excuse could there be found for a Government if it persisted in such an error for over two years, and then was only rescued by the fortune of war?

Did the Executive fully trust the soldier it chose as Commander-in-Chief and retained in that office through 1916, 1917, and 1918? The speeches and actions of the Government, at least of its dominating members, point another way. Its action over Nivelle in February 1917, and its speeches over the great British offensives indicate distrust of our leader in France. Then in 1918 we shall find that in the midst of the victories—just before the brilliant stroke which broke the Drocourt-Quéant line and just after the British had emerged triumphantly from the Battle of Bapaume—it caused an amazing telegram to be sent,¹ warning him that it would be gravely inconvenienced by heavy casualties.

¹ August 31, 1918. Three days later, the Canadians broke through the Drocourt-Quéant line.

The war closes in November with the British stroke on the Sambre. The time is ripe for zeal in acknowledging the high skill of our leadership, for enthusiasm over it. Enthusiasm is then indulged in by our authorities at home. But over what? Chiefly over the advantages of 'unity of command' and the military genius, French not British, to which we and the world owe deliverance from a German yoke!

A study of the speeches in 1918 and 1919 in and out of Parliament, and of the various inspired references in print to the way the war was won—who can fail to observe in these a deplorable slight to the British Commander-in-Chief and his entire Staff at General Headquarters?

Valour, admittedly, was acknowledged in our leadership—in a tribute by the Secretary of State for War. Sacrifice of self was borne witness to by the Prime Minister in a well-turned phrase. But the skill proved by that wonderful series of British victories between August 8 and November 11, 1918, which broke the German Army, was not then, and never has been since, acknowledged at all by the Government. A disgraceful omission. Naturally the worst myth of the whole war gained credence therefrom: the myth that, thanks to 'unity of command,' French genius, being at length given its chance, waved its wand and forthwith made up for years of indifferent British generalship and a senseless policy of attrition.¹

The British Government was right to pay tribute to the French Generalissimo—France was our Ally and Foch had a fighting spirit which he breathed into his own men at a time when the Allies were ready to strike the decisive blow. But there is another reason why the name of Foch must always be held in esteem in this country and particularly in the

¹ Views of this kind exist, too, in France. But can we wonder at that when we find an ex-Minister for War and later a Prime Minister declaring in a French journal, 'Des deux chefs (Foch et Pétain) dont toutes prévisions se sont vérifiées et qui ont préparé et réalisé la victoire'? No mention, even the most distant, of the series of battles between August 8 and November 11 mounted by the British Commander-in-Chief, his Staff, and Army Commanders. M. Painlevé might surely have known a little better.

British Army. He has a claim on our gratitude in the following matter :—

On March 24, as already stated, Haig met Pétain at Dury at 11 P.M. There were present, besides the two Commanders-in-Chief, the British Chief of Staff and a British officer attached to Pétain's Staff. Pétain was much concerned about the position. He stated that he intended, if the German attack continued to press on towards Amiens, to withdraw French troops south-west to cover Paris. He said he had issued orders for the French divisions now concentrating about Montdidier to take this course.

The basic principle of Allied strategy, namely, that the French and British Armies must at all costs keep united, would be abandoned if this happened. It was evident that the Germans would press on towards Amiens, and in that case the two armies must be separated and a gap opened between them into which the enemy would pour his forces; for it would be impossible for the British line, drawn out as it was to its utmost extent, to conform to the suggested movement to cover Paris.

In these circumstances Haig returned to his headquarters at Beaurepaire and at once wired to London asking the C.I.G.S. and the Secretary of State for War to come over to France. He felt that the only possible solution of the problem was to place the supreme command of all the Allied forces on the Western Front under some resolute, combative French soldier, who would preserve the close union between the French and British Armies, and would stand and fight to the last in front of Amiens. Haig had not, nor had his Army Commanders or Staff, the least intention of yielding a yard of ground unless they were overwhelmed. The story—reported by a French statesman to Lord Milner on March 25 but not credited by him—that Haig had threatened to uncover Amiens had not, of course, an atom of truth in it. The way to lose Amiens, obviously, was to separate the two armies which a withdrawal of the French forces south-west to cover Paris must have caused. Sir Douglas Haig's plan, on the contrary, was to keep the two armies together at all

costs and stand and fight—the plan which was ultimately adopted.

After the interview at Dury on the night of the 24th, Haig had immediately thought of Foch, then stranded at Versailles, as the best man for the purpose, and he communicated this to the C.I.G.S. and Lord Milner, and afterwards to Clémenceau. He wanted no half-hearted compromise. He wanted a policy of 'Thorough.' And we shall by and by see that it was directly through his pressure that the position of the Generalissimo was, after some hesitation, fortified, and more co-ordinating devices to solve the difficulty of the reserves were swept aside.

It was natural Haig should think of Foch at this crisis : he remembered October and November 1914 at Ypres.

Sundry people have, since then, fancied they were the first to propose—or suppose—Foch as Generalissimo. Looking into this question, with full knowledge of dates and other facts, one perceives at once that these fancies no more call for serious attention than do the fancies of various people who believe that they 'won the war.'

The appointment of a generalissimo was the swift, direct result of the interview at Dury on the night of March 24, 1918.

Foch was made Generalissimo on Haig's intervention.

Going right down to the root of the matter, what happened, as far as the Higher Command was concerned, in March 1918, with Germany striking for a decision in the west, was this : Haig, through will-power and judgment, quietly enforced his strategy on French and British alike. He was the real Generalissimo in that March crisis. Though neither in March nor in early April could he induce the French to believe that Germany was putting all her resources against the British Army or to abandon their notion that a greater blow was about to fall on themselves, he did bring home to them the most vital necessity of all : namely, that the junction between the two Allied Armies must be preserved. Pétain was not adopting that strategy, as the incident of March 24 at Dury shows beyond a doubt. Thus, in order that

both Allies should adopt the same strategy, a change in the system of command was immediately essential, else Ludendorff must win. And Haig immediately forced this matter to the front, saving thereby the Allied cause. His will-power prevailed then, as we shall find it prevailing in face of sometimes French, sometimes British opposition, and sometimes both, in three or four other of the gravest crises during 1916-1918.

In the clamour of various claimants and war-winners this has been overlooked.

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Foch must be esteemed for the attitude he adopted. He believed with Haig that the Allied Armies must defend Amiens at all costs. The acute danger of a separation of French and British forces was removed soon after.¹ It was not necessary further to entertain proposals for falling back gradually from first one Channel port then another in case the French fell back south-west to cover Paris.

Foch's service in this is indisputable—as was Pétain's most skilful and patient work in bringing back French troops into trim after the mutinies and other internal troubles they suffered from in 1917—troubles, if not caused, at least augmented through the failure and abandonment of the Nivelle offensive in April and May 1917.

But to pay full and hearty tribute to the Generalissimo, to acknowledge that admirable fighting spirit of his, which had shone in the defence of 1914 as well as in the French offensive for Vimy Ridge, etc., in 1915, it was not necessary to leave unacknowledged the brilliant skill and foresight with which the British Commander-in-Chief and his Staff and Army Commanders thought out, and carried through, the whole of the series of battles from August 8 to November 11, 1918, which really broke the German centre and with it the German Army. That, as Foch has said, could not have

¹ One perhaps should not say it was completely removed till the Battle of Amiens on August 8, 1918, the operation which Haig finally selected as the most promising among several discussed, for the British Armies, between himself and Foch.

been done by the British Army without the co-operation of French, American, and Belgian troops ; and one may add that it was the good fortune of the Allies to have in Foch himself the right man to attune the co-operation of French and Americans. But the fact that co-operation by all the Allied forces, American, French, Belgian, and Italian, was essential and afforded does not detract from the merit of the British effort. In the same way it could be truthfully said that the French could not have triumphed at Verdun but for British co-operation, leadership, and fighting man. But that does not imply that the French did not devise and carry out their own plans there.

There is indeed but one way to discount the high value and skill of British leadership in the field during these three months of crowded victory. It must be shown conclusively that, though British victories, such masterpieces of war as, for example, the Battles of Amiens, of Bapaume and of the Scarpe in August and September 1918 were not thought and worked out by British generalship. But that cannot be shown, for evidence exists to prove that British leadership thought out, as our troops fought out, these battles.

Indeed, in one marked instance, as we shall find later, Haig immensely improved and 'scientised' the whole plan of the Allied advance for the purpose of bringing the struggle to a close in 1918. Until he intervened in this matter, that plan was quite without coherency.

It is sufficient and illuminating evidence. It is exact : well documented. I should not have thought of undertaking this work had I not made myself familiar with it. Many French and British leaders—soldiers and statesmen—did fine service throughout these colossal years : it would be fanciful or false to overlook the statesmen : but after a long and cool study of the evidence, one naturally reaches the conviction that the British Commander-in-Chief was the most indispensable of them all.

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The alluring word 'genius' has been applied to various feats in the war ; for example, to the daring stroke which won

for the Germans the Battle of Tannenburg in August 1914. It has not been applied, so far as one knows, to any act of British leadership on the Western Front. That may be judicious! After all, there is only one witness to genius whose evidence is unimpeachable, the witness Time. The others may not be of more weight in war than in art or in letters. And yet—were it of service to discuss what feat of arms in the war best deserved the description ‘genius,’ should we leave out of reckoning the sequence of British victories, the inseparable sequence, that carried us in three months from the Somme to the Sambre? We shall find when we reach the period in question, that the British Commander-in-Chief and the Staff and Army Commanders who strove devotedly under him had to work out themselves not only the grand strategic principles and the tactical details of that plan for breaking at the central and strongest point the resistance of the great German Army; but that at its most critical phase—the second half of August 1918—the Commander-in-Chief was compelled, first, to decline absolutely to adopt a plan of operations which was crude and perilous and must have deferred victory and thrown back the Allied cause; and that, when he had gained his point, he was offered about the greatest discouragement from the civil power at home which can be imagined. We shall find that he set at nought that discouragement, and proceeded with his operations, regardless of the attitude of so-called supporter or of opponent. He set out in August to complete the work of the British Army in offence and in defence during 1916 and 1917, and the first half of 1918. He trusted to his army and his colleagues and went confidently forward with his design.

Time, the supreme arbiter, will disclose whether or not ‘genius’ contrived that magnificent British plan of August 8–November 11, 1918. We may leave it at that.

CHAPTER III

ORGANISING THE BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

BEFORE we deal with the Allied preparations for the 1916 offensive and the position in France at the beginning of that year, it may be useful to touch briefly on the work of organising the British Expeditionary Force, on which for several years Haig had been engaged, with Haldane—Secretary of State for War 1905-1912—G. F. Ellison and others at the War Office. That is an important period, if now largely forgotten; and no doubt the appointment of the new Commander-in-Chief was due to his work then as well as to his service in 1914-1915 as Commander of the 1st Corps and later of the First Army.

It is strange to glance back two or three decades before the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, and see what was then our view of the remote possibility—or impossibility—of Great Britain taking part in a great European war.

In 1888 the Duke of Cambridge asked the Government for some guidance as to what was expected of the British Army.

In December 1888, Stanhope, the Secretary of State for War in Lord Salisbury's Administration, told him it must be distinctly understood that the employment of one army corps in the field in any continental conflict was 'sufficiently improbable to make it the primary duty of the military authorities to organise our forces efficiently for the defence of the country.'

That seems to have been our guide through the 'eighties and 'nineties, and indeed until Haldane—who neither knew, nor affected to know, anything of military matters—

took office on the formation of a Liberal Government in 1905 as Secretary of State for War.

Stanhope's directions may have been doubted and disputed by soldiers and civilians, but, as far as we are aware, there is no record of any serious and really authoritative statement, in or out of Parliament, that it was a wrong standpoint, and that we ought to prepare ourselves with a big or a small army to take part in a European war on land. Stanhope's view held good till the South African War, and for many years after that war.

Lord Roberts's crusade for obligatory service after the Boer War related strictly to home defence. He did not found his case for obligatory service, he did not argue it, on the ground that presently we should be involved on a great scale in continental war. On the contrary, he pressed for it in the cause of home defence—the security of Great Britain from an invader. After the Agadir incident, and the militarist attitude of Germany, he and many others certainly took Germany into account, and believed a war with her to be inevitable. His speech at Manchester in 1912—'Arm and prepare to quit yourselves like men, for the time of your ordeal is at hand'—made no secret of this, still he did not picture us as fighting in a great land war on the Continent.

Lord Roberts continued his pressure, therefore, for obligatory service, but it was to be obligatory service for home defence. It was not asked for as a method by which we might engage at short notice and on a large scale in a great European war on land. When we made an Entente with France under a Conservative Government in 1904, which was adhered to on the Liberals coming into power, and Sir E. Grey succeeding Lord Lansdowne as Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, such an eventuality might well have been taken into most serious account by both parties and by the whole nation. But it was not.

Our possible participation on a small scale in a war on the Continent was indeed not authoritatively considered till after Haldane took office. There is no doubt about that. We may disagree with Haldane's whole attitude towards

Germany, we may think that he suffered himself to be imposed on by the Kaiser and the Kaiser's military party, and that his speeches lulled this country into a false sense of security. Many good soldiers and civilians hold that view, and others the opposite view. It is a matter of opinion. But it is not a matter of opinion that he and his military advisers in 1907, 1908, and onwards were bent on fashioning a force to engage, if necessary, in a war outside this country. A strictly limited force—certainly. Still, a force which would be speedily fit for embarkation and action. Stanhope had barely visualised, as a remote possibility, the employment of a single army corps in a war on the Continent—though remembering the period, and the state of public and parliamentary opinion then, this cannot be held to reflect on him.

Haldane and his advisers, in considering the employment of 100,000 men in a European conflict, did not greatly exceed the army corps Stanhope spoke of; but they dealt with it as something more than a 'remote improbability.' They proceeded to think out and organise the plan for equipping and embarking a British Expeditionary Force. That is fact. It is accepted by all serious opponents of the Secretary of State for War between 1905 and 1912, as well as by his supporters and military advisers.

Haldane visited Berlin, where he talked with Moltke and others. He returned home much impressed by what he heard from them as to the great value of mobility in modern war. No doubt there has been a tendency to overstate the importance of this as a 'discovery.' Mobility of a kind was not unknown to the British Army. There are people who have spoken and written as if we could not, without the new magic, have conveyed across the Channel in 1914 a force worth mentioning within a month, let alone twelve or fifteen days. They forget the Boer War, when, within a few weeks, we landed 10 divisions. Mobility was not an overlooked factor in 1899, or even in earlier wars in which we engaged; and we might have landed, under the old system, our divisions in France in August 1914, within, roughly, the

same space of time in which they were actually conveyed there.

Further, we might have filled up, at first, our casualty gaps, as they occurred, by sending across Militia and then Volunteers and Yeomanry.

However, in recalling the fact that mobility of a kind was known in former campaigns, we must not overlook the value of a cut-and-dried scheme for landing an expeditionary force in France. Even with that scheme, we were not quite up to time ; and, with no scheme, is it likely we should have been effective as early as Mons or the Marne ? There is no knowing what might have happened to the French left had there not been a well organised force of British troops on the spot then—apart from what they actually did in the way of fighting. Besides, as a result of the preparations, and the new view of our European responsibilities, many of our officers for years past had gone over to France and studied the northern battle-grounds there. They had become well acquainted with the military history of the country, and with the influence which different geographical features had exercised on past wars, and were likely to exercise on future ones. The pre-war organisation of our Staff on sound military lines—lines which proved right—was of great importance.

The value of the work done by the Secretary of State for War and his advisers from 1906 onwards lay largely in the manner in which they taught us to think and act, not, as hitherto, in incoherent military units, but in coherent independent divisions. They made mobility effective by scientifically organising their expeditionary force long before it started for the field of campaign. That had not been done in the Boer or in any previous war.

To carry gradually through the new scheme for an expeditionary force the reformers had to overcome a great deal of tiresome and old-fashioned if natural prejudice. Their difficulties were in this respect not unlike those of Cardwell in his short service and other reforms 35 years or so earlier, after the Franco-Prussian War. They had to weld together

the existing military branches in the face of strong opposition. In one respect the Secretary of State for War, as a Liberal, was in a better position than would have been a Conservative in his place, and, like him, wishing for drastic reforms and for co-ordinating the different branches ; for he at any rate had no compunction in interfering with our old Militia tradition. In other respects he was perhaps in a somewhat more difficult position than a Conservative would have been. He had to reckon with peace-at-all-price elements in his own party, whose chief wish was to bring down the Army Estimates—to reduce them even to the standard existing before the Boer War.

In 1906 the Secretary of State for War wished for two or three soldiers to work out with him systematic plans for a small but efficient and thoroughly mobile force. As regards time, the French asked that the expeditionary force might be ready within fifteen days, and they suggested that it should consist of 100,000 men, though, as the plan evolved, twelve days and 160,000 men were proposed and resolved on instead. He consulted Ellison¹ as to advisers, and it was arranged that Haig, who was then in India as Inspector of Cavalry, should be called in. Haig returned home, and, in the course of the year, the three, assisted by one of the financial experts at the War Office, were at work on the new plans. The manual 'Field Service Regulations, Part 2, Organisation and Administration' (General Staff, War Office), gives a fair general idea of how the British Army, in its new form, was thought out and organised during this period. The manual seems a small enough thing. One can almost slip it into the waistcoat pocket. But the opposition to it was prolonged and stiffer than the opposition which Cardwell had met when reorganising the British Army. In fact it had to

¹ Since the South African War Ellison was, successively, Secretary to the War Office Reconstitution Committee, A.A.G. Army Headquarters, and Principal Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for War between 1905 and 1908. In the latter year he was appointed Director of Organisation, Army Headquarters, and between 1911 and the outbreak of war he acted as Staff Officer to Inspector-General, Overseas Forces. His knowledge and judgment as to the new military organisation were exceptional.

be fought out page by page ; a troublesome task for the reformers, though probably all the better for that in the end.

Haig was first appointed Director of Military Training ; later he became Director of Staff Duties. An able soldier who did fine work on the Western Front in 1917 and 1918, and is thoroughly conversant with the way the British Expeditionary Force was fashioned from 1906 onwards, has supplied the following memoranda :—

‘ From his earliest days, at the Staff College, D. H. had always taken his profession seriously. Staff work as Brig.-Major of Cavalry at Aldershot, in the South African War, and as Inspector of Cavalry in India gave him opportunities for thought and work on the development of his own arm, but he was a constant reader of all the best authorities on the combined action of all arms ; one of those students who read constructively, pondering deeply and forming his own conclusions.

‘ When called to the War Office as Director of Military Training in August 1906, he was therefore ready to help the Secretary of State for War in the work of reconstruction and reorganisation which was so urgently required.

‘ The Esher Committee had allotted “ Organisation and Training for War ”—with other duties—to the D.M.T., Staff reconstruction and the duties and training of the General Staff falling to the Director of Staff Duties. But it was found essential that the vital work of developing and training the General Staff should be carried out under the same hand as similar work with regard to the troops. The two were, therefore, combined under Haig when he became D.S.D. in November 1907. The task he set himself was heavy. In addition to the executive routine work connected with existing army requirements, considerable changes in organisation had already been decided on and had to be effected. Haig brought new ideas to bear on these changes and on the framework which the Secretary of State for War had in his mind. The resulting work of reconstruction and new creation might be grouped under—

‘ (a) Formulating principles of organisation of the

Military Forces of the Nation, suitable for the most likely war of defence, jointly with the Navy, and suitable also for the inclusion of Colonial Forces in our defensive plans.

‘(b) Reorganisation of Regulars, Militia, Volunteers, and Yeomanry in accordance with (a).

‘(c) The development of the General Staff and consequent changes in the Administration Staff. Their several duties and responsibilities.

‘(d) The production of Field Service Regulations embodying British conceptions of the principles of Strategy and Tactics, of the organisation of the whole of the military forces in the manner best suited to their principles, and of the duties of Commanders, Staff and Troops in applying them on Active Service.

‘In all of these there were greater difficulties to surmount than is generally known, though in (a) and (d) there was less active opposition than in (b) and (c), because the former were essentially subjects for the new General Staff in which any opponents, in or out of the War Office, could show little right to interfere. But in (b) old traditions, vested interests, and serious claims for exceptional treatment brought every possible influence to bear in opposition to reforms based on logic and uniformity of design. In (c) antipathy to the underlying principles and detailed application of the recommendations of the Esher Committee, together with a rather petty jealousy of the growing power of the new General Staff, had already raised a storm of opposition. Some modifications were clearly necessary, but it was, in the circumstances, extremely difficult to work out a Staff scheme which should be suitable for our Imperial needs and acceptable to all branches of the War Office.

‘The Great War has abundantly proved the value of the work done, but its accomplishment was mainly due to Haig's great knowledge, quiet determination and unfailing patience and tact in dealing with all opponents. These qualities made him an admirable assistant and partner with Lord Haldane, whose broad views, great intellectual power, and

firm determination to put the nation's means of defence on a thoroughly satisfactory basis, enabled him to overcome the multitude of difficulties which were raised in the country and put forward in Parliament.'

The British Expeditionary Force in 1914 was so minute compared with the army which we soon found we needed, and had ultimately to raise, that the policy of those who devised and fitted it out has often been ridiculed and condemned. Its censurers during and since the war have been as severe as, and far more numerous than, its opponents between 1906 and 1914.¹ This attitude is easy to understand, but it is not quite reasonable.

Moreover, to blame Haldane and the group of soldiers who worked with him whole-hearted in the matter surely carries with it blame of the French military and civilian authorities also. France did not ask us to be ready to support her with a big army in case of an attack by Germany. In fact the number of men she originally proposed was, before war broke out, increased after a time by Great Britain—increased by some 60,000; and France in a Continental military matter such as this would be taken as an authoritative guide. Some may say that France—owing to the vague nature of the Entente, which implied no absolute obligation on the part of one country to join the other should

¹ Perhaps the strongest point against the creation of a small expeditionary force to join the French against Germany has been overlooked, namely, if we are seriously considering the possibility of engaging in a war against a mighty Power like Germany, should we not make up our minds to apportion to the struggle a great army ourselves? At any rate we now are seized of this—that to fight on the Continent is to fight on a Continental Power standard, in which we need hundreds of thousands or millions of men; munitions on a huge scale, with big gun and rifle factories in going order from the outset—for it takes a year to make a rifle!—and obligatory service. Some people contend that in future war we shall not require such old-fangled weapons, and that conscription will be uncalled for—as the whole business will be done, and done speedily, from the air with poison bombs and the like. A popular but dangerous argument, which might induce us to enter into military alliances without going to the expense of arming ourselves fully. However, at present there is no sign that Powers like France and Japan or Italy are persuaded that war in the near future will be fought neither on land nor sea, but simply from the air with bombs.

war break out—did not press in 1906 onwards for a far larger measure of support because she knew there was no chance of getting it. There certainly was no chance—with either Liberals or Conservatives here in office. There is, however, no evidence that this was the actual reason which kept France from asking not for a small expeditionary force but for a big army to join her in case Germany attacked. The French seem to have underestimated the strength which Germany, on mobilisation, could put rapidly into the field. Lord Haldane has been censured for listening too much to the Germans. But it is a question whether we were not quite misinformed by the French in the matter of the military assistance she would need. This point of view has been neglected.¹

The truth is that neither France nor Great Britain before the struggle began foresaw its nature. Quite an authoritative view, for instance, was that for economic reasons the war could not last longer than about six months! It was simple to predict a war between France and Germany into which we should probably be drawn. Hundreds of thousands of people predicted that, unthoughtful and thoughtful, expert and inexpert alike. But the duration of such a struggle, the extent to which nation after nation would be drawn in, above all the extraordinary trench character of the struggle after a short war of movement prelude, and the weapons, some of them new, some of them centuries old—these were not envisaged by France, Great Britain, Russia, Austria, Germany or any other Power which came in at the start.

Hardly had the war started before many people were convinced that it must prove a very long one and that our arrangements in regard both to men and munitions were utterly inadequate. That, however, is a different matter; it was incomparably easier between, say, August and October

¹ Since writing the above passage one has been fortified by reading the following words by a soldier whose views always carry great weight; 'On the data supplied to it, the Committee of Imperial Defence was justified in believing that the military aid we were prepared to give to France would suffice to turn the balance in favour of the Entente.'—Major-General Sir F. Maurice in *The Army Quarterly*

1914 to get some general notion as to the character of the struggle before us than to do so during the period when the British Expeditionary Force was being organised. Extravagant claims have been made no doubt for Lord Haldane. Extravagant claims have been made for the equipment of an expeditionary force, the artillery of which started, for example, practically without high explosive that was supplied to both the French and the German Armies from the outset. On the other hand, it is unfair to overlook the fact that the army which we were able ultimately to put into the field was based largely on the new organisation by which the British Expeditionary Force was fashioned by the Secretary of State for War and his military advisers from 1906.

There is another point which those who strove with the Secretary for War during the organising period are not likely to overlook: it was fortunate that Haldane when he took office regarded himself as an amateur in military matters and resolved at once to make use of the knowledge of trained soldiers. He did not start with prejudices or plans of his own to be obstinately adhered to. He started frankly as a learner—a decided advantage from the point of view of trained and progressive soldiers who were to work with him. This had not invariably been the case when civilians took up their duties at the War Office. Had he been given *carte blanche* by the nation, or by Parliament which represents it, he might have been able to fall in with the wishes of his military advisers more fully, to have built up—whether France asked for it or not—a more substantial force than crossed the Channel in August 1914. It would be idle to affect we were prepared for a big war in 1914. In his final Despatch (March 21, 1919) the Commander-in-Chief, referring to the length of the war, remarks—‘In the first place we were unprepared for war, or at any rate for a war of such magnitude. We were deficient in both trained men and military material, and, what was more important, had no machinery ready by which either men or material could be produced in anything approaching the requisite quanti-

ties. The consequences were twofold. First, the necessary machinery had to be improvised hurriedly, and improvisation is never economical and seldom satisfactory. In this case the high-water mark of our fighting strength in infantry was only reached after two and a half years of conflict, by which time heavy casualties had already been incurred. In consequence the full man-power of the Empire was never developed in the field at any period of the war. As regards material, it was not until midsummer 1916 that the artillery situation became even approximately adequate to the conduct of major operations. Throughout the Somme battle the expenditure of artillery ammunition had to be watched with the greatest care. During the battles of 1917, ammunition was plentiful, but the gun situation was a source of constant anxiety. Only in 1918 was it possible to conduct artillery operations independently of any limiting considerations other than those of transport. The second consequence of our unpreparedness was that our Armies were unable to intervene, either at the outset of the war or until nearly two years had elapsed, in sufficient strength adequately to assist our Allies.'

So that, during the whole of this period, we were not, as stated at Versailles in January 1918, 'over-insured' in the west; we were under-insured there; and we and our Allies suffered accordingly. Those, however, who worked out the plans for the first hundred thousand cannot be blamed for that.

CHAPTER IV

FROM DECEMBER 19, 1915, TO THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME

STRATEGY in regard to actual operations in the field is for trained soldiers. Strategy in the broadest meaning of the term, of course, cannot be divorced entirely from the statesman's province. But that is another matter. The civilian who intervenes in operations in the field usually takes a fall, no matter how clever he may be. It is rather puzzling why this should be so, for the guiding principles of strategy seem simple enough, appealing to any person with good horse-sense. To study, for instance, the campaigns of 1916-1918 on the Western Front is soon to recognise that a guiding strategic principle of our leadership was to preserve the closest possible co-operation with the French Army. This, except to the resolute ignoramus, is quite as obvious in regard to the Commander-in-Chief's operations in 1916 as in regard to his operations in 1918. Haig never wavered in his resolve to hold fast to this rule. It was the same whether he was working with Joffre, with Nivelle, with Pétain, with Foch. It was the same whether his command was a wholly independent one as during the first year; whether French direction was temporarily imposed on the British Army, as when in February 1917, behind his back and against the judgment of himself and his Headquarters Staff, a wrong occasion and an unfortunate generalissimo were selected for the purpose; or whether he himself determined on such direction, as in March 1918. The principle to co-operate closely and the will to do so were present, invariably, throughout his whole command in France.

The will was put to an acid test during the middle period through the blunder of a British War Cabinet. Yet never throughout the war did leadership in the field co-operate more loyally with our Ally than in the spring of 1917, alike when the French Generalissimo was at his zenith, and, later, when he was at his nadir and being baffled and humiliated by his compatriots, civilian and military.

The British leader believed we could not reach victory except by keeping closest touch between the two armies. It was absolutely essential, therefore, on that ground. But also it was one of the chief directions in Kitchener's Charter, as it has been termed—that is, the instructions given him on December 28, 1915, after he had assumed the leadership of the British Army in France.

Viscount French, in his book *1914*, has told us what were his instructions by the Government before he embarked with the British Expeditionary Force. Two chief instructions were, first, he should support and co-operate with the French Army against the common enemy; second, he was distinctly to understand his command was an entirely independent one and that he would in no case come under the orders of any Allied general.

He was reminded that 'the numerical strength of the British Force and its contingent reinforcement is strictly limited, and with this consideration kept steadily in view it will be obvious that the greatest care must be exercised towards a minimum of losses and wastage.

'Therefore, while every effort must be made to coincide most sympathetically with the plans and wishes of our Ally, the gravest deliberation will involve upon you as to participation in forward movements where large bodies of French troops are not engaged and where your force may be unduly exposed to attack. Should a contingency of this sort be anticipated, I look to you to inform me fully and give me time to communicate to you any decision to which His Majesty's Government may come in the matter. . . .

'In minor operations you should be careful that your subordinates understand that risk of serious losses should

only be taken where such risk is authoritatively considered to be commensurate with the object in view.'

The instructions of December 1915 covered the same ground as those of August 1914 in governing principles ; though the language varied owing to the change in circumstances made by a year and a half of war. Haig was 'to support and co-operate with the French and Belgian Armies against our common enemies.' He was 'to assist the French and Belgian Governments in driving the German Armies from French and Belgian territory and eventually to restore the neutrality of Belgium.'

The defeat of the Germans by the combined Allied Armies was always to be the primary object. The closest co-operation of the French and British forces as a united army must govern his policy.

His command was to be an independent one. In no case was he to come under the orders of an Allied general further than the co-operation with our Allies necessitated.

The possibility of an enforced retirement was not overlooked in these directions : 'If unforeseen circumstances should arise such as to compel our Expeditionary Force to retire, such a retreat should never be contemplated as an independent move to secure the defence of the ports forming the Straits of Dover, although their security is a matter of great importance demanding that every effort should be made to prevent the lines which the Allied Forces now hold in Flanders being broken by the enemy. The safety of the Channel will be decided by the overthrow of the German Army rather than by the occupation by our troops of some defensive position with their backs to the sea. In the event, therefore, of a retirement the direction of the retreat should be decided in conjunction with our Ally with reference solely to this eventual defeat of the enemy, and not to the security of the Channel. Notwithstanding the above, our Expeditionary Force may be compelled to fall back upon the Channel ports or the circumstances be such that it will be strategically advantageous that while acting in co-operation with the French Army it should carry out such a retirement.

The requisite steps required to meet this contingency should therefore receive due attention.'

When we glance at the map and note the small space between our line and our base in France, some anxiety in this matter seems natural. Two years later it was speedily to become at least as acute as in October and November, 1914.

The direction as to minor operations was identical with that given to Viscount French.

Finally, the Commander-in-Chief was assured he could 'rely with the utmost confidence on the whole-hearted and unswerving support of the Government, of myself, and of your compatriots.' A pledge fulfilled : as long as Kitchener lived.

After the system of command was changed in the spring of 1918 by the appointment of a generalissimo, it was necessary to modify Lord Kitchener's Charter in certain directions. This was done in June 1918 by the War Office. The general objects to be carried out by the Commander-in-Chief remained unaffected, but the second direction ran :—

'In pursuance of these objects you will carry out loyally any instructions issued to you by the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces. At the same time, if any order given by him appears to you to imperil the British Army, it is agreed between the Allied Governments that you should be at liberty to appeal to the British Government before executing such an order. While it is hoped that the necessity for such an appeal may seldom if ever arise, you will not hesitate in case of grave emergency to avail yourself of your right to make it.'

The third direction :—

'It is the desire of His Majesty's Government to keep the British Forces under your command as far as possible together. If at any time the Allied Commander-in-Chief finds it necessary to transfer any portion of the British troops to the French area in order to release French troops for purposes of *roulement*, it should be distinctly understood that this is only a temporary arrangement, and that as soon as

practicable the troops thus detached should be returned to the body of the British Forces.'

The fourth direction instructed the Commander-in-Chief to aid in the training and equipment of the American troops, as far as might be required from time to time; and also to aid the Americans in administrative matters.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh directions were maintained in their entirety.

This modification of the original instructions shows clearly that the method known as 'unity of command' adopted in 1918 was a compromise. It conferred large power on the Generalissimo in strategic direction: but at the same time it devised and dwelt markedly in the second and third clauses on precautionary measures; and for these precautionary measures the British Commander-in-Chief was answerable. A difficult compromise, as we shall see hereafter, unless everything went well and the judgment of the two leaders over all important matters coincided: for, under this arrangement, the British Commander-in-Chief was, as hitherto, wholly answerable for the safety of his troops; but, additionally, he must be responsible for any strategic decision of the man over him in case that decision resulted in a British catastrophe. True, he had a remedy. He was entitled, if he chose, to appeal to the authority at home. But war has a habit of not waiting on appeals to authority at home; and it is easy to see that in the sudden and violent emergencies that arise in the field the remedy must usually be impracticable—worse, very likely, than the disease. In fact, such a compromise between Allies must in practice depend not on its provisos and precautions or on the judgment of the authority at home: it must depend on the character of the two leaders in the field. If they are not most fortunately assorted, 'unity of command' between Allies under a generalissimo will break down. Apart from that, there is no magic whatever in the term. Later, we must discuss this in detail, with concrete instances. The question arose in 1917 after the Calais Conference in February. But the change in the method then was a temporary expedient, and

Kitchener's directions of December 28, 1915, were not modified till some months after Foch had been made Generalissimo in 1918, when it became imperative that the Commander-in-Chief should have his position more or less accurately defined.

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On taking over the command, December 19, 1915, Haig heartily agreed with the decision reached at the first meeting of the Allied War Council at Paris on December 6, namely, that our action in 1916 should be founded on the plan of a general, simultaneous offensive in the main theatres of war. That, it is quite well known, absolutely was his own conviction. He set small value on a number of local attacks without a strategic aim, and did not at all believe in waiting on events. Taking up merely a defensive position made no appeal to him. Such a policy would, indeed, achieve nothing, unless the Allies could count on bringing Germany to her knees by a vigorous blockade at sea—the hope of which was remote.

The British Army must strike hard in the west. We must assert our initiative there. Such was the conviction of the new Commander-in-Chief and of the men who worked with him at G.H.Q.

This policy implied, necessarily, that, to succeed as soon as possible, the nation must concentrate its energies on the Western Front. The Commander-in-Chief was the last man to make light of our position and prestige outside the main theatre of war. His service in India, in the Soudan, in South Africa, had naturally impressed on him our responsibilities not only in the east but throughout the world. But he saw clearly from the very outset that to dissipate our forces in a number of distant and lesser theatres must deny us success in the west—and might end by losing us the east.

How could he believe that a defeat of Turks or Bulgarians in Mesopotamia, the Egyptian Frontier or Greece would seriously shake Germany's position as long as she held firm on her main fronts? Nor would an Allied success there, at the expense of effort on the Western Front, necessarily detach Austria in time.

We have since learnt that those German strategists who really counted took much the same view. Falkenhayn, in an illuminating passage in his book *General Headquarters, 1914-1916, and its Critical Decisions*, showed himself set sternly against expenditure of German strength even on the Italian front at that period. The Austrians asked to be substantially reinforced by German divisions that they might carry the war into Italy. The request was stiffly refused. It was not the way to strike at the heart of England or to break Russia.¹

But Haig's view that Great Britain should concentrate on the Western Front by no means ruled out such aid as could be given to Italy. He and his colleagues would feel that strong and successful pressure on the Italo-Austrian front might indeed weaken Austria's effort against Russia. Perhaps they did not set implicit faith in the 'steam-roller' tradition. Yet they fully realised the importance of the eastern front—in Europe. They acknowledged gratefully the immense aid Russian efforts had brought us, particularly at the beginning of the struggle in 1914 whilst we were organising for war on a European scale. They wished for an offensive in 1916 which would bring in the British, French and Russian Armies simultaneously, and also, if possible, the Italians. There was a heartening movement at the close of 1915 towards a more intimate and scientific co-ordination between the Allies. 'We must found the policy of this century on an Anglo-Franco-Russian Alliance,' Mr. Asquith declared in pleading for a strengthening of the General Staff by more intercommunication between the Allies. The British Higher Command believed in founding our offensives on such a basis.

The Dardanelles expedition as first conceived was by no means unfavourably viewed at G.H.Q. Could it have succeeded on its earlier lines—a small force and a surprise

¹ We have found since the war an astute German publicist, Maximilian Harden, carrying Falkenhayn's line still further, and pointing out the German successes in smaller theatres of war—Serbia, Roumania, and even Italy in 1917—were really worthless to Germany.

attack—it might have had useful strategic results in the main theatre of war. However, that phase had passed, the original plans had been exchanged for a great, absorbing adventure ; and indeed a few days after the new command had started in France British forces had withdrawn from Suvla and Anzac. Unfortunately, British forces were then embarking on other unremunerative experiments in the south-east. The large forces absorbed in Macedonia, as Ludendorff points out, became a drain on our land and sea resources. The Salonica experiment was entered into in earnest directly after we had made up our minds to retreat from the Dardanelles : and the military as well as the political judgment of our French Allies had urged and carried that exchange against the unanimous feeling and protest of British military authorities both in France and at home. M. Briand, succeeding M. Viviani, became Premier in October. He was well known to be a believer in the Salonica argument. Work upon the 'British Internment Camp,' as the Germans sardonically described Salonica, was in full swing by October 1915.

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Though promising as regards the desire for closer Allied co-ordination in the main fighting fronts and for a simultaneous offensive on a large scale in 1916, the military position on our front necessitated a great deal of caution at first. We had to settle down to a very close study of conditions. We were short of munitions in December 1915. It had only been possible to join the French in the autumn offensive by economising and gradually accumulating a mass of material for the purpose. We needed more divisions. Even the existing divisions were undermanned. The fresh troops as they arrived must be trained before they could be put in.

Then there was the problem of labour at the front. A great offensive in the spring or summer of 1916 would mean immense preparations in road-making, etc., throughout the winter, and apart from the fighting troops Haig had at this period no labour force in France. To convert these troops

into a labour force could only be done at the expense of their war training.

Hence, however much we wished to speed up for a great stroke at the enemy in the coming year, we had to move warily. It was impossible to decide when or where to attack in 1916 till the situation had been thoroughly studied.

It was of first importance for the British at this stage to familiarise themselves with the intention and attitude of their Ally; to discover what France, after her efforts and expenditure in 1914 and 1915, was prepared to contribute.

To understand various facts given now for the first time in this book, one should first try to get a fair idea of the French standpoint. The French did not adopt the view of a good many garrulous people in this country in 1914 and 1915 that by our intervention at the start we 'saved France.' Perhaps that profession was not much sillier than a Prime Minister's profession four years or so later that Foch had saved us. But both were bad. For every Englishman who believed England was 'saving France' in 1914 it would have been easy to discover at least one Frenchman to reply politely that, on the contrary, France was doing this service for England. Exactly what occurred when the Germans swung back on the Marne in September 1914 is still in dispute, though the 'miracle of the Marne,' or the alleged stroke of decisive genius in the Le Gond marshes, has received a setback of late owing to certain German admissions and revelations. As a result, the service of our Expeditionary Force has tended to appreciate in value. Still, the fact remains that in 1914, and through a large part of 1915, our army was small, whilst the French was large. The French losses in those years were very heavy. Their line was very long, and various sections of it were combative and costly which later became stable and quiet.

Hard facts these, which affected, naturally, the French attitude during the rest of the war. They certainly would have affected us in like conditions.

Because we were unprepared in 1914 for land warfare on the scale of a first-class European Power, France had to take

the lion's share of the fighting till we were ready for a great stroke in 1916. Therefore a time was sure to come when she would argue, 'It is now the turn of the British to take their full share of the heavy work.' As for the notion that Great Britain had intervened in 1914 from altruistic motives alone, it could not be seriously regarded. Great Britain was bound in honour to intervene through her pledges for the neutrality of Belgium. But she was also bound to intervene through the instinct of self-preservation, for she could not suffer Germany to overrun France and imperil her own position in the Channel.

Thus at the beginning of 1916 the French were expecting a great deal more from us on land. Our industrial resources were being developed for munition-making on a large scale—though as a fact our actual supply still depended on the orders given by the War Office before the Ministry of Munitions of War existed.¹ Also, by the close of 1915 we had resolved to adopt compulsory service.² So France looked to us for larger efforts on the Western Front—an expectation not unreasonable, and indeed in human nature.

But there were other motives we must realise in order to understand the attitude of our Ally between the beginning of 1916 and the close of the war. The French nation is proud of its military fame. The Napoleonic tradition has been a great and precious French possession. It remains so. Were France to take up ardently the idea of ending war for ever, that illustrious military tradition would, all the same, be rightly treasured in France. It is deep-rooted in the French. Hence though the French, even before Verdun, had begun to incline to the opinion that they could not

¹ In the last two and a half years of war the Ministry of Munitions did sterling work, and it was admirably led in 1915 by Mr. Lloyd George. But, apart from previous orders, its contribution of shells and guns in 1915 amounted, virtually, to nothing. The legend that it saved the position in that year, or in the early months of 1916, is preposterous. It became productive in 1916, though even in that year it had far from succeeded in solving the labour and other difficulties. (See Appendix II, Vol. II.)

² But the Military Service Bill extending compulsion to married men did not pass the House of Commons till mid-May 1916, and compulsion did not replace so-called voluntary enlistment in Great Britain till June 1916.

afford many more costly strokes, they were not ready to hand over to an Ally the military direction together with the greater share in effort. This led to a certain conflict in French national impulses. They felt that, considering the size of their population, they could not safely risk further very heavy losses in men : at the same time they were anxious to play a great part in any decisive blow which might be struck on French soil. They were the senior military partner in the Alliance. They must preserve this rank at all costs.

They looked to the end. They recognised that in the peace negotiations they ought to have a particularly powerful voice. Their astute statesmen probably looked beyond the peace too. It is not for us to question the soundness, or patriotism, of such a policy. What nation striving intensely for a place in the sun can honestly find fault with that line ? The proceedings at Versailles in 1919 and the negotiations that followed show how great nations and small nations alike feel that, first of all, they must look to the interests of their own people. Democracy and the desire for peace have, so far, not lessened this instinct. The spirit of nationality which so largely guided the negotiations at Versailles and the decisions of the Treaty must encourage it.

In studying the position between December 1915 and the start of the offensive at midsummer 1916, British G.H.Q. had to acquaint themselves thoroughly with the temper of the French Army at the time. They found it excellent.

There were a few minor operations on our front within that six months, such as St. Elloi, but nothing of signal importance on either side till the Germans struck at Verdun in February 1916. We had to settle down to the vast preparations for the coming Allied offensive. Many friendly meetings and discussions took place between the leaders of the two armies. The Chantilly Conference in 1915 had determined there should be in 1916 a vigorous and simultaneous stroke. It was now further agreed that preparatory actions should be undertaken by both armies. The British were to take the chief share in these, and the French to hold

themselves in reserve for the decisive blow. As to the British front, the alternatives of attack were (1) the area from the Somme to Vimy Ridge, (2) between the river Lys and the sea. A series of negotiations ensued. Haig conferred with Joffre in December, on taking up his command, again on January 20, 1916, and often afterwards. Joffre wished the British speedily to relieve the troops of the Tenth French Army, and also a French territorial division on its right between our First and Third Armies. On December 31 the British Commander-in-Chief replied to these requests that he was already making arrangements for the relief of the left of the Tenth Army; and also considering *the relief of its right. Also, he was going into the question* of an attack on the front of our Third Army, just north of the Somme. By the middle of January we were arranging to form reserves from our divisions then in training. These reserves were to be organised in three corps, one in each army area, and they were to be prepared to move as required.

But we were much embarrassed at this period, when our forces were increasing and preparations had to be pressed on for a great offensive, by two circumstances.

First, we had not too much space allotted to us behind our lines for training and disposing of our troops, a difficulty which increased as our army in France grew.

Second, all the railway arrangements still remained in the keeping of our Ally. People who did not visit our sphere until well on in the war found it difficult to imagine the state of things before Sir Eric Geddes and the staff who worked with him had built a new system of transportation by rail. With the best will, our Allies, preoccupied with their own huge task of feeding and equipping their armies, could not solve this problem for the British forces. General Pershing in his Report has shown the value the American organisers set on this matter as soon as they established themselves strongly in France. Railway organisation may be rather an unromantic side of campaigning; but it is mighty. We cannot keep for long out of sight of that line, either in trench war or the war of movement. The Germans showed a

singular prevision in this matter, and started with marked advantages over the Allies. Von Falkenhayn points out how in 1914 the transition to trench warfare enabled the Germans to get the utmost out of their possession of the interior lines. As soon as the position stabilised, they could strike with quickly transferred forces wherever they deemed necessary. The systematic application of trench warfare 'rendered possible such an increase in the capacity of railways that they became in effect the equivalent of a reduplication of the reserves.'¹ Stress has often been laid on the German inferiority in numbers in 1916 and 1917 as compared with the Allied forces on the Western Front. Falkenhayn himself sets forth his version of these figures in a remarkable table. Critics of British efforts before the final phases of the war cite such figures as proof of our unintelligent strategy. Is that not partly because the critic has himself failed to understand, not only the power of defence in trench warfare, but also the value of railways?

The French High Command quickly made it clear they attached high importance to preparatory wearing-out attacks by our army, which they thought we ought to start by April 1916. They urged that we should employ at least 15 to 18 divisions in a limited offensive north of the Somme by the end of that month. If the Russians were attacked by Germany in the spring, this April offensive should be increased to 25 British divisions. In case the big Allied offensive was postponed until the summer of 1916, Joffre asked for another British offensive in May. That is, there ought to be two British preparatory offensives before the big effort was made simultaneously by both the Allies in France. The suggestion was agreed to.

On January 20, Joffre visited St. Omer, and the agreement in regard to the simultaneous attack was confirmed. He thought Russia would not be ready until June.² The pros-

¹ *General Headquarters, 1914-1916, and its Critical Decisions.* (Hutchinson.)

² Joffre was right. Brussilov's great Russian offensive from Pripiet in Poland to the Roumanian frontier started on June 4, 1916. On May 14

pect of an Italian offensive was doubtful, but he was doing his best to forward it. The French would be ready by the close of April, and five points were already being organised for attacks on the French front. He again urged the importance of preparatory strokes against the enemy : suggested one might be made by the British north of the Somme on April 20 to capture the first German system of defence. If the Germans—who, however, were believed to be somewhat depressed at this season—were to attack the Russians, this would be a good chance for the big Allied offensive.

Supposing it was decided the British should make a big attack on the Belgian coast, the French Army would share in it. But we had some doubt about the discretion of attacking in that sector at the time. The intermingling of troops there was inconvenient for the purpose. It will be found that on various occasions during the war the insertion of the troops of one army in the midst of another, for purposes of attack, caused difficulties. The French wished, for example, to participate in a small degree in the great Flanders offensive of 1917. The proposal was useful as indicating good comradeship. But its adoption resulted in the loss of fully a week when time was of the very essence of the contract. This will be shown fully in a later chapter. Our Allies had to bring up their men and material, and the attack had to be delayed till they were ready. We had already been kept waiting in the spring, when we wished to begin switching off preparations from the Arras area to Flanders, because the Nivelle plan then was in a state of suspended animation—far from wholly on, yet not wholly off. This second delay still further reduced our chances of a complete break-through, or success on a scale that would have done what the British Admiralty and Government desired—cleared the Belgian Coast.

Before returning to details as to the interviews and dis-

the Austrians attacked the Italians on the Trentino front. On June 9 the Italians were able to start a counter-attack there. These dates show that in 1918, contrary to a later impression, there was a genuine movement towards co-ordination.

cussions between the Higher Commands at this period immediately preceding the German attack at Verdun, we may consider a point or two in relation to them generally.

An impatient critic who pins all his faith to prompt decisions, insists leadership must make up its mind at once and never 'wobble' thereafter, and so on, may protest the two Commanders-in-Chief took a long time to agree on a definite scheme of operations, and then departed from it—as we shall notice presently—in regard to the preliminary attacks which the French thought essential. Well, could the critic get behind the scenes of this war—or any modern war scientifically waged—he might find that all the leaders of great forces had to feel their way with circumspection towards their offensives. He might notice a variety of changes in form and detail as the time approached for a big action. The system of independent command between Allies may have defects, as has the system known as 'unity of command,' where the respective armies are about equal and the question of casualties and responsibility for casualties are an ever present and menacing consideration. But these deliberations and revised understandings between the two leaders in 1916 cannot be attributed to the system of command then at work. Had the leaders drawn up in December or January a scheme of operations, and agreed not to depart from it, they would have acted quite wrongly. Both would have deserved to be relieved of command by their governments. Suppose a generalissimo had existed at the time, and had reached a cast-iron conclusion in December or January and refused to be deflected from it, he equally would have deserved to be relieved of command. There is neither heroism nor intelligence in reaching crude military decisions, and standing by them whether circumstances change or not.

The general principle, adopted by the Allies in 1915 at Chantilly, of a co-ordinated, simultaneous offensive in 1916—France, Great Britain, Russia, and Italy all standing in—was sound: it could be adopted well beforehand and abided by. That, however, is another proposition. The point is that,

as regards these negotiations between Joffre and Haig, we had to arrange and modify our scheme on the Western Front according to the prospects of Russian, and in a lesser degree Italian, action. In the summer and autumn of 1918, the position was in one respect simpler than in 1915 and 1916. Russia, a great agent in the earlier period of the war, and one distinctly to be waited on, was out of it in 1918: and, to be frank, Italy had then to be regarded as subsidiary.

Yet to be at all behind the scenes of war was to recognise that even in 1918, within three months of the Armistice, cast-iron decisions admitting of no revision did not of necessity exist. The idea as late as August and September 1918 was that our strategy should proceed on the assumption that the Germans would be overcome in 1919. But the British Commander-in-Chief came to another conclusion. There is scarcely a more interesting fact of the kind in the whole period 1916-1918 than this.

Early in September 1918, Haig definitely concluded that the Germans could be disposed of, after all, in 1918. This, we shall find, rests on unquestionable record. It is mentioned here because it shows how leaders of great armies must keenly study every symptom in the enemy, and be ready to modify or change schemes of offence or attack as occasion dictates. Decisions in military warfare are not to be precipitated as decisions in mimic or party warfare. The story of Palmerston, when his Cabinet colleagues were at loggerheads as to what should be resolved on finally, is familiar. He told them, in effect, it did not much matter what they decided on provided they all decided on the same thing—and, presumably, acted on it forthwith. This may sometimes be effective in politics: it would be fatal in war.

The series of discussions between the two leaders, and the change of plan over preparatory attacks, etc., show that both knew their business. There is, really, no welter of conflicting counsel about them. They lay remote from the bog of indecisions in which, then and later, civilian counsellors at home floundered—full of earnest patriotism, full of the

passing information of the moment, yet, too often, 'so informing that they ne'er informed.'¹

* * * * *

Joffre said at this period that the French Army would be quite fit for the coming big offensive ; but, returning to his strong contention, he re-emphasised the importance of the British, meanwhile, wearing out the enemy by lesser attacks. We were at this time organising raids on a considerable scale ; he thought well of this policy.

On January 23 there was a conference at the headquarters of the Third Army between the Commander-in-Chief and the Army Commander, Allenby, when arrangements for a preparatory attack on the Somme were discussed. Joffre approved the proposal. He again insisted that at least 15 to 18 British divisions should be allotted to this attack, but that it ought to be increased to 25 divisions if the Russians were attacked in the spring, and the French joined in south of the Somme. Haig assented to this on February 1. But, as regards any preparatory attacks other than this one north of the Somme, he considered they should only be made from twelve to fourteen days before the main Allied offensive. Meantime, a course of raids by the British was promised.

General Rawlinson was requested to study the Flanders area at this time in order to determine whether an attack was feasible there.

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The German attack near Verdun, which was to modify the plans of the Allies, was now approaching. Von Falkenhayn has given a clear account of the origin of this stroke. The German General Staff, forming their plans in 1915 for a western offensive, had to consider whether it would pay them better in 1916 to strike hard at the British or at the French lines. In Flanders the condition of the ground early in the

¹ Major-General Sir Charles Callwell in his excellent book, *Experiences of a Dug-Out* (Constable & Co.), gives an illuminating account of how, early in the war, he had to carry some hare-brained proposal for yet another new campaign to Mr. Asquith, who observed that it seemed as simple as hens laying eggs.

year would prevent any far-reaching operations till the middle of the spring. To attack there, moreover, they would have to put in some 30 divisions. A similar force would be required for an attack south of that area ; and they concluded that it was not practicable, with their existing forces in France, to concentrate so many troops on one part of the front. Even if they denuded Macedonia and Galicia of German forces, about 26 divisions would be their utmost total reserve in France. The German design, if an attack on the British was resolved on, would be to drive us clean off the Continent and force the French behind the Somme ; and, even if this was achieved, they would have to fall on the French in a subsequent operation.

The scheme was regarded as too ambitious. An attack on a shorter front was preferred. Should it be made on Belfort or Verdun ? Verdun was chosen as preferable. The Germans believed that a very heavy attack on a few miles of front there would, if successful, put a tremendous moral strain on France and perhaps break her resistance, though strategically this plan was not so ambitious as the other.

It seems clear now that the plan, despite German criticism, was not so desperate or ill-conceived as we were accustomed to represent it. It did put a mighty strain on France. Fort Vaux fell early in June after a fine resistance, and the Germans came very near the inner and last line of defence when they attempted, even as late as July 13, 1916, to overcome Fort Souville. They can scarcely be condemned, militarily, for not waiting whilst the British Army developed in 1916, any more than they could be condemned had they remained in their trenches in 1918 and waited whilst the American forces began to pour into France. In any case, by striking hard and early in 1916 they came near to a very great success—as they did two years later. In both instances the situation was saved by the Allies ; in the first under a system of independent command, in the second under a system of 'unity of command'—but in neither with a great deal to spare. The fact that the French were able by Pétain's methods to hold Verdun, and, later, to recover,

through skilful operations by Nivelle, the forts and the ground won by Germany in the spring and summer, was an immense military asset to our Ally.

The German attack on Verdun from the east of the Meuse started on February 21, but the French informed us ten days earlier that they were expecting it. Discussions and arrangements between the Commanders-in-Chief proceeded, however, as before. Through our Mission at the French G.Q.G., a note was drawn up for Haig. It proposed that, if the Germans attacked the Russians, the French and British should attack in force on both sides of the Somme, after preliminary attacks by both armies a few days before. Everything was to be ready for the main Allied offensive on July 1, and, if a break-through was not then effected, the battle should be proceeded with as a wearing-down effort. Additionally, General Joffre still urged that there should be preparatory British attacks in April and May, with a third in Flanders. The French would make partial preparatory attacks at the same time. Finally, it was suggested that the British should take over more line.

On February 12 we agreed to the date for the main Allied attack north and south of the Somme. Some 25 British divisions would be available for the purpose—provided we did not take over more line. We had to point out, however, that, if we used up troops in the various suggested preparatory attacks, we should have less striking power for the joint offensive.

At a conference at Chantilly on February 14, July 1, 1916, as the opening day of the joint offensive was confirmed. The Allies, however, had still to consider the needs of Russia, and they fully agreed that they must strike sooner, if, meanwhile, the enemy attacked in the east. A compromise was reached in regard to the constant French pressure for preparatory attacks. Haig agreed to a partial attack in Flanders a week or two before the joint offensive, and Joffre gave up his desire for the various spring attacks which had been discussed. At the same time we were to extend our line, and the French to be given a footing which they desired

north of the Somme—an arrangement not particularly convenient to us. It had been discussed before.

The Germans struck at Verdun on February 21.¹ But the scale of their attack was not immediately clear, and next day Joffre expressed his belief that they meant to launch a great offensive somewhere on the Western Front. He therefore urged anew that we should attack strongly wherever it was possible, speedily take over more line, and be prepared if necessary to send some divisions to reinforce the French Army. We had already ordered the relief of certain French divisions; but, as the enemy had not yet weakened his forces on our front, we were not justified at the moment in denuding the First and Third British Armies of reserves. However, the reserves of the Third Army were ready to move south of the Somme if necessary.

We could not, with safety to our own forces or to the Allied cause, undertake the maximum of these requests. It was still doubtful what reinforcement of men, guns, and ammunition would reach the British lines within the next few months.

The truth is Haig held now, as throughout these discussions, that far the best plan for the Allied cause was to trust to one great British stroke in the summer, fully prepared and with all the forces available.

A number of lesser attacks with small objectives did not appeal to him. His wish, emphasised later in communications with the French, was for one massive attack on the Somme with the two Allied Armies in the closest possible co-operation; and this attack ought to be directed primarily against the enemy's forces rather than for any mere geographical objectives.² Ultimately that is what the

¹ The attack was made by the Fifth German Army. Its commander, according to the ex-Crown Prince, wished the attack to be made on both sides of the Meuse, but this was vetoed by the Higher Command.

² We also wanted the infantry attacks, French and British, to be delivered simultaneously. The actual direction, on June 21, for the two armies declared: 'Le but essentiel des opérations est de porter une masse de manœuvre sur le faisceau des lignes de communications de l'ennemi qui jalonnent Cambrai-Le Cateau-Maubouge. La route Bapaume-Cambrai devra donc être l'axe de la progression initiale.' But the battle speedily became a stroke directed against the enemy's forces.

Battle of the Somme came to : such in substance was its sound strategy. The idea that we could somehow think the Germans out of France and Belgium without first engaging and wearing down their mighty forces was attractive but unintelligent.

How necessary it had been for us to move with circumspection, and not to adopt forthwith all the requests for relief and attacks, etc., is illustrated by a remarkable Report furnished by M. Abel Ferry, a French Deputy, in June 1917 to the French Government. He recalls 'les demandes faites par le gouvernement français au gouvernement anglais d'extension du front ou d'amalgame.' It puts the French case with conviction. The author is severe because the British did not accede fully to the various requests of General Joffre. Haig, he says, told Joffre that the wearing-out preliminary attacks pressed for by the French should not be made more than ten or fourteen days before the general offensive 'sinon les Allemands auraient le temps de combler leurs vides par des prélèvements sur leurs dépôts, de réorganiser et de rééquiper leurs réserves avant l'offensive.' A good 'prétexte,' comments M. Ferry ; but, he adds bitterly, it contrasts strangely with the expensive war which the French had been carrying on in 1914-1915.

The criticisms and the conclusions of this author—a gallant man who was killed during one of his official tours of information at the front in September 1918—have been published in a book entitled *La Guerre vue d'en-bas et d'en-haut* (Grasset, Paris, 1920). They cannot be accepted in all cases as sound. Far from it. If the British in 1916 before the Somme had done all that was asked, they might not have been able to come to the aid of their Ally as they did in the summer of 1917 : and indeed it is questionable whether in such a case they would have been able, by taking, as they actually did, the chief part in the Battle of the Somme, to hasten the relief of Verdun.

Yet M. Ferry's views are useful. They are expressed plainly. They show clearly the advanced French standpoint at this time, and in fact throughout.

He was an ardent supporter of the *amalgame* which will be referred to later. In the last thing he wrote, in September 1918, he declared, 'Je suis allé parler au Président de la prochaine offensive américaine. . . . L'amalgame n'est qu'un mythe : le Haut Commandement américain, égoïste dans l'élan d'idéal d'une grande nation, s'y refuse.'

M. Ferry's desire to make the fullest possible use of the Allies and to impose the French will on their leaders and troops in the field was patriotic and thoroughgoing. But it must have led swiftly to disaster.

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The German attack at Verdun had now begun to develop unmistakably. All idea of any other big enemy stroke on the Western Front, such as Joffre had spoken of, passed away. The Germans took the Louvemont heights on February 26 and entered Douaumont Fort on the following day; and, though repulsed at various points, could claim successes, with a large number of prisoners.

Haig then, to hearten and help his French colleagues, adopted to the full the requests for relief; and Joffre expressed his gratitude, declaring that this aid had enabled him to reconstitute the French reserves.¹

So, through friendly conference and discussion and good mission work, the Allied leaders came to understand each other's standpoint—and respective difficulties, too. They remained in constant touch and communication through March and April, and up to the time when the long preparations for the joint offensive at the close of June 1916 were complete. Knowledge of this correspondence reveals a very interesting fact: throughout the period when the Germans were battering at the defences of Verdun, a world crisis extending over many dark weeks, the leaders in the field were coolly conferring over a coming battle on another part of the line to be started months later.

The impassiveness of great leaders in military crises is

¹ By taking over more line, for instance, we enabled the French to release their Tenth Army, whose divisions could be used for reinforcement at Verdun.

an old and fine tradition. We all know the story of how Napoleon returning from Moscow was beset by excited companions, and asked them, would they rob him of his serenity? There is Voltaire's humorous anecdote, too, of Charles XII. dictating letters at the siege of Stralsund when a cannon-ball fell in the next room and caused his secretary to drop the pen. 'What is it,' asked Charles tranquilly; 'why aren't you writing?' 'Ah, Sir, the cannon-ball!' ejaculated the secretary. 'And what's that got to do with what I am dictating?' was the reply—'continue!' Such tales are often dressed up, yet there is a fine truth at the back of them. Few things are more reassuring in the tremendous crises of war than the calm and detachment of true leaders of men. The agitation and flurry spread through crowds during mimic crises, political and other, in peace time, could only bring disaster in the field. Men engaged in war may be considerably lower than the angels, but, with a commander whom they trust, they have at least the chance of rising above the animal or crowd frenzy often worked up at the hustings or elsewhere. The degrading thing, 'buzz,' was through those years in France always discouraged by the cool demeanour of our leaders there. When Joffre was displaced, and Nivelle took over the command of our Ally's forces, what happened? Scaremongers from the base and 'much-talkers' were allowed to intervene, and they were instrumental in robbing the new Generalissimo of any remote chance of success which his plans may have had. British generals had one advantage over their colleagues: the Channel at least lay between them and scaremongers at home.

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Thus the preparations for the Battle of the Somme and the repulse finally of the German effort against Verdun were carried through between the leaders in the field. The public at home on the whole knew next to nothing of what was going forward there.

The leaders came to understand each other. Haig, wholly on his own initiative, asked Joffre to propose the

strategy—a request which his colleague gratefully acknowledged.

The Allied system worked, on the whole, smoothly. Intense but quiet, plodding endeavour was the order of the day in our lines. That was characteristic of the best of our race. We owe our success in the war, pre-eminently, to the fighting courage and massive output of the British race throughout the Empire. But, in whatever degree actual success in the field may be attributed to any one individual, the union of coolness and skill in the British Commander-in-Chief which saw us through crisis after crisis cannot be lost sight of.

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Such were the relations between the British and the French. Without being lyrical about them, one can truly say they were excellent. French critics, perturbed not unnaturally by the progress of the Germans at Verdun in the spring and early summer, had scarcely helped Joffre to preserve these relations unruffled. But he kept his head. Not long after the battle had started, our own critics began to be active. They contrasted the success of the two armies, and took care that the contrast was not in favour of their own army. Knowing little, and not caring to know, about the respective difficulties which faced the two armies—such as the much larger number of 'strong points' which held back the British Army, and our inferiority in munitions—they deplored the usual want of intelligence in our leadership. However, we shall find that the Allied attack worked without serious friction.

CHAPTER V

THE SOMME, 1916. THE OPENING ROUND

(By J. H. B.)

TEMPORARILY overshadowed by the more dramatic events of 1918, the first Battle of the Somme none the less occupies a position of unique importance in the sequence of operations on the Western Front. It is the central episode of the war in France, and that not merely in point of time but because it marks a definite turning-point in the struggle. It was the opening of what was to prove a new phase in more than one respect.

Attention has already been drawn to the change in the relative positions of the French and British Armies that took place in the year 1916. It is an event that cannot be too greatly emphasised, for the course of the war will not properly be understood unless this fact is constantly borne in mind.

Throughout 1914, and in somewhat less degree in 1915, gallant as had been the action of the British troops at all times, valuable as had been their influence upon the course of affairs on more than one critical occasion, it remains true that, compared with the tremendous efforts made by France, the share of the common burden borne by Great Britain on land had been almost insignificant. During the greater part of this first period the moral support of the British alliance was of far more importance to France than the material assistance which the scanty British forces then available could give to our Ally in the field. While Britain was raising and training new armies, hastily improvising the manufacture of guns, ammunition and the thousand and one other requirements of modern war, hurriedly endeavouring to fit herself

at the eleventh hour to make war with a force commensurate with her duties and responsibilities,¹ France, as has been shown in the previous chapter, sustained practically unaided the whole weight of the contest with her hereditary enemy.

Admiration for the wonderful performance of our original Expeditionary Force, and of those early reinforcements that were sent out to it, should not be allowed to blind us to a fact that has a decisive influence upon all subsequent operations in the western theatre. Long before the British national armies had reached a strength that was really effective in a contest of such magnitude, the flower of the French Armies had fallen. When, therefore, in February 1916, the supreme trial of Verdun was added to the other burdens France had undergone, taking a fresh and heavy toll of her depleted manhood, the effects of those early battles of 1914 and 1915 forced themselves upon the minds of the Allied military leaders with an insistence that could not be denied.

In the summer and autumn of 1916, when it was seen that the German effort at Verdun had definitely failed, it was the fashion in England—maybe it was good propaganda—to ridicule the strategy of the Crown Prince and to magnify the losses Germany had suffered in an attempt that was studiously represented as having had nothing but vainglory for its aim. That will not be the final judgment on the Battle of Verdun, neither did such a view recommend itself at the time to responsible military opinion in France.

Verdun had come within reasonable distance of knocking out France for good. Though it failed in that by a sufficiently narrow margin, the battle had certain very definite results. In the first place it marked the culminating point in the fighting spirit of the French Army. Too many heroes fell in the defence of Verdun for a like quality of heroism to be possible thereafter among the general average of French divisions. The sacrifices France had already made during two years of war could not be continued on the same scale

¹ The bayonet and sabre strength of the British Army in France in January 1916 was some 460,000 men. In April 1916 the figure rose to 560,000, and by July 1, 1916, a total of 660,000 had been reached.

without grave risk that the French people, to use Ludendorff's phrase, would be 'bled white.' The fighting *capacity* of the French Armies remained high and even improved. To the last, French rank and file showed a skill in fighting that was long unequalled on the Entente side of the line. That was the heritage of pre-war military training. But from Verdun onwards the fighting *spirit* of French troops declined, and the decline showed itself on many occasions and in many ways.¹

Secondly, Verdun completely upset the Allied plan of campaign in the west for 1916. It may indeed be fairly argued that, if the Crown Prince's offensive failed to secure victory for Germany in 1916, it averted a German defeat in that year. It transformed the Somme offensive from a supreme French stroke for a decision to a British battle of attrition, and gave the British Army for the first time the dominant rôle in the Allied operations in the principal theatre of war.

The change was a big one. As a result of it not only did the centre of interest, and with it the main grouping of the German divisions, shift gradually from the French to the British front, but there was also involved a modification of policy in the conduct of operations. General Mangin, in his very fair-minded and most instructive book *Comment finit la Guerre*, calls attention to the completeness with which the French military authorities had accepted before August 1914 the doctrine of the offensive 'à outrance.' He describes both the heavy losses to which this conception of war led and the difficulty experienced by the French in adapting themselves to a different visualisation of the war. So long as the sole direction of Allied military policy was French, the idea persisted that the war could be ended rapidly by a great offensive stroke. All the French offensives of 1914, 1915, and again in the spring of 1917 were attacks 'en grande

¹ The fighting *strength* of the French Army was recruited more and more by drawing upon the native man-power of the French colonies. Before the end of the war, 545,000 black troops had been employed in the French armies, largely as shock troops. (Mangin, *Comment finit la Guerre*, p. 259.)

envergué,' based upon the idea of forcing a quick decision. Such a conception of war was too much in keeping with the French character and the fighting quality and temperament of French troops to be lightly shaken off, even though the results of the French offensives indicated clearly enough that the moment for such methods had not yet arrived.

England was forced at an early stage into a different conception of war, for she was not ready, and unless the struggle took the form of a *bataille d'usure* there was no hope that she would be able to develop her full military strength before a decision had been reached. After the first few months, therefore, the idea of a war of attrition came *more naturally both to the nation and to the army, and was* moreover in keeping with her national character. Accordingly the accession of the British to a greater share in the burden of fighting, and consequently to a larger voice in the direction of operations, led naturally to the development of a system of fighting more suited to the actual facts of the military situation. Except so far as Verdun was an example from the German side, the real war of attrition starts with the assumption by the British armies on the Somme of the leading rôle in the fighting on the Western Front.

As has been indicated in an earlier chapter, this reversal of the positions of the two Allied Armies ran counter to French military tradition and feeling. It was only natural that the French, believing themselves pre-eminently a military nation and fighting on French soil with the numerically larger army, should desire to keep the main direction of the war in their own hands, and continue to the end to figure as the senior partner in the struggle. It would be difficult to say how far the reaction against Joffre and the eager welcome extended to Nivelle and his grandiose schemes were not due to the feeling that Joffre was surrendering the premier position to which on so many grounds the French nation believed themselves entitled.

It is matter for no surprise, therefore, that little reference can be found in the British official Despatches to this great change inaugurated by the first Battle of the Somme.

Only those who have the wit and special knowledge to read between the lines of Sir Douglas Haig's scanty references to the Allied situation in the spring and early summer of 1916, and to the French share in the battle itself, will discover in the Despatches any indication of the true position.

It could scarcely be otherwise. The object of the Despatches, written in the actual process of a struggle the end of which was still unknown, may be taken to have been to give an accurate account of events as they happened. It was clearly impossible to enter very deeply into causes and effects, and all comment had to be made with much reserve. Anything that might conceivably offend the susceptibilities of Allies, or give information to the enemy regarding Allied plans, policy, dispositions or moral, had obviously to be omitted, even though thereby truth suffered partial suppression.

In certain instances, as will be pointed out later on, this necessary reticence reacted upon the credit of the British Army, and still more upon the reputation of British generals. This can now be set right and ought to be, for reasons already given. At the time, however, it was a disadvantage that, so far at any rate as the second of these results was concerned, was gladly borne in the general interests of the Allied cause. It was a misfortune unavoidably attendant upon the habit of publishing despatches in the full course of war. The personal aspect of the matter was not important, so long as the cause prospered.

It will be found throughout the Despatches that all reference to the actions of Allies is avoided as much as possible. Where such references are essential in explanation of British operations, they are brief and are confined to statements of fact. Moreover, facts of an unpleasant nature connected with our Allies are either passed over in silence or, if they are of so important a significance that entire omission would falsify the Despatch, are referred to with the utmost lightness of touch.

Examples of this practice occur all through the Despatches and will be commented upon in this book in due course. The first with which we are concerned is the extreme brevity

and restraint of the reference to the effects of the Verdun battle upon the moral of the French Armies. A period of deep anxiety is passed over with the statement that the strain on our Allies continued to increase, and that it was accordingly agreed that the French and British offensive should not be postponed beyond the end of June. Note, moreover, the order in which official politeness places the Allies. It is the 'French and British offensive,' yet at no period of the battle did the French take more than a subsidiary part in it.

With this general warning, which is intended to govern all remarks in this and following chapters that may seem to put matters in a somewhat different light from that which at first sight may appear to be reflected in the official Despatches, we can return to consider in fuller detail the strategic significance of the first Battle of the Somme and its effect upon the relations of the French and British Armies.

The objects of the battle are declared in the official Despatches to have been three, namely: To lighten the pressure on the French at Verdun; to prevent the transfer of German troops from the Western to the Russian Front; and, thirdly, 'to wear down the strength of the forces opposed to us.'

Clearly, of these three objects the third was by far the most important, for upon the degree of completeness with which it was attained would depend automatically the success of our efforts to achieve the first and second. This third object is, in fact, the keynote to the fighting. It indicates the ultimate emergence of the British conception of the nature of the struggle upon which for two years the Allies had been engaged. It illustrates the British instinct to get down to the facts of a problem, to take a long view of them, and to set to work, patiently, industriously and resolutely, to push forward step by step to the goal of steadfast endeavour. It was the Higher Command's exposition of a mental outlook which the fighting man of 1916 was wont to express half humorously by saying that he reckoned that the last five years of the war would be the worst.

None the less it would be false to suppose that the assault of July 1, 1916, and those that followed it during five months of almost incessant fighting were undertaken with no other plan or hope than that of battering at successive German entrenched positions until the heart had been hammered out of the German Army. The realisation that the contest was likely to be a long one and the determination to persist till victory was reached however long it might be deferred were not held to be incompatible with the skilful laying of plans so as to take prompt advantage of the uncertain chances of war, and in any case to shorten and lighten the struggle to the fullest extent practicable. The idea that the first Battle of the Somme was conducted on the strategic and tactical principles of a bull at a gate is one as harmful to British prestige at home and abroad as it is discordant with the facts. Criticisms, pardonable perhaps in 1916, when to an uninstructed public the long lists of casualties appeared to be counterbalanced by comparatively little practical achievement, ought not to be allowed, now that the war is over, to become so crystallised as to affect the considered judgment of history.

Let us examine what the Allied plan on the Somme was, remembering that it was subjected to many modifications in detail, both before and after the commencement of the battle, to meet changing circumstances. It will then become apparent how the cutting down of the scope of the French share in it brought the British policy of attrition to the front, and made the wearing down of the German forces opposed to us the main object of the operations, though without excluding the possibility of more immediate results.

It is believed that an examination of this plan and a more complete account of the policy and circumstances governing the Allied operations will establish three propositions of no small interest. First, that in its essentials, in all, that is, but name, 'unity of command' existed as fully in 1916 as it did in 1918, and that its limitations in 1918 were the same as in 1916. Second, that the responsibility for the Somme fighting was a joint responsibility, and that there-

fore the cheap contrast sometimes drawn between British 'obstinacy' as exemplified by the Somme 'blood bath' and French military genius as instanced by the victories of 1918 cannot stand. Third, that while the plan was from the first a joint one, and was in fact carried out jointly in almost perfect accord between Allied leaders and troops alike, the driving force of the joint operation, in the events which happened, was from start to finish supplied by the British.

The governing principle upon which the fighting of 1916 was to be conducted had been decided upon, as has already been pointed out, before the close of 1915. It was then expected that an improvement in the Allied supplies of men and munitions, and in particular the growth of the British armies, would put the Allies in the position in 1916 to take the offensive with chance of success on all fronts.

The essential thing, in order that the Allied efforts might not be met and defeated in detail, was that the different operations should be opened as nearly as possible simultaneously. Assailed on all sides at practically the same moment, it was not unreasonable to hope that Germany and Austria would be crushed beneath the superior weight of Allied man-power. The object being to obtain a decision in 1916, it followed that the attacks themselves must be attacks on a grand scale, that is to say, attacks to break through with no definite limits to their objectives. This, in broad outline, was the general Allied plan which Sir Douglas Haig found in existence when he was appointed in December 1915 to the supreme command of the British forces in Franco.

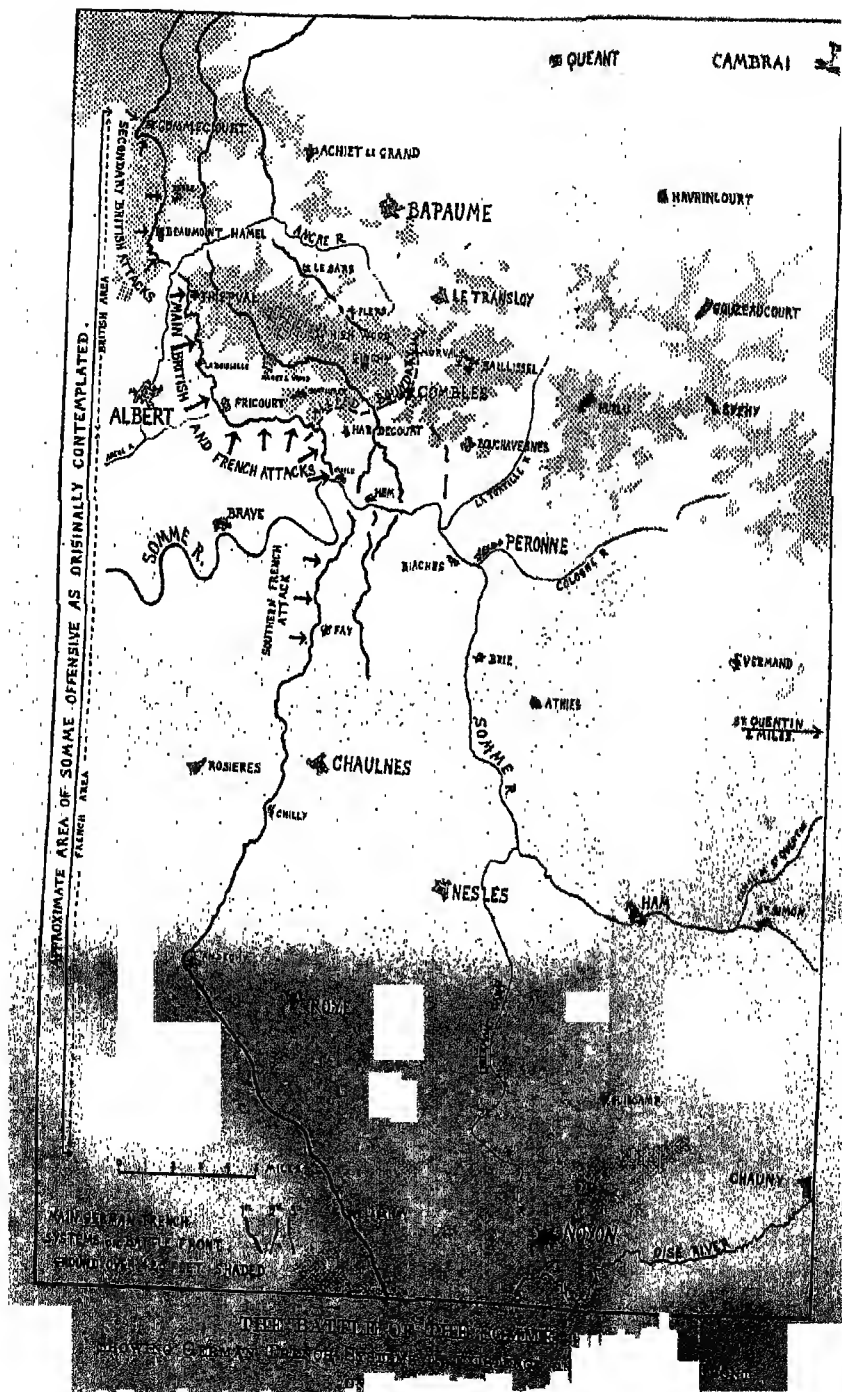
Turning now to the application of this plan to the Western Front, it is important to remember what was the official French view at this time. Having regard to the efforts already made by their armies and to the fact that the British forces were at last approaching continental standards in numbers and material, our Allies thought that the proper division of labour as between the two armies was for the British in the first place to exhaust the German reserves in the west by powerful preparatory attacks with limited

objectives, and then, when this had been done, for the main blow to be struck by the larger and more experienced French Army. This supreme blow would take the form of an offensive with unlimited objectives, delivered by the full weight of all the French reserves kept in hand for this purpose and supported by all British divisions that could still be made available. In this plan, therefore, pride of place was to be given to the French Army.

This programme, attractive in many respects, presupposed that the enemy would remain inactive till the Allied plans matured; and also that the growth of the British Army would be sufficiently rapid to enable formidable preparatory attacks to be undertaken by it, and yet leave the British Commander-in-Chief with sufficient fresh troops in hand to take effective part in the principal operation. Neither of these suppositions was realised. Moreover, the difficulties of the British position were increased by the urgent desire of the French that the front held by the Tenth French Army in the Arras sector should be taken over by British troops. If this relief were carried out, it would be quite impossible for the British to deliver preparatory attacks of any magnitude and still have sufficient fresh troops available for the main joint offensive.

This question of extension of front crops up at frequent intervals throughout the history of the next two years and will be dealt with in detail in a subsequent chapter. The truth is that no helpful conclusion can be drawn by mere measurement and comparison of the miles of front held by the two armies. The proper perspective can only be obtained by a comparison of the relative strengths of the British and French Armies and of the number of German assault divisions grouped on the British and French fronts respectively.

The negotiations that took place between the Allied Commanders-in-Chief on the subject of the proposed relief and preparatory attacks have been discussed in the previous chapter. As the result of them, governed as they were by the change in the general military situation effected by the



opening of the German offensive at Verdun, the idea of preparatory assaults of a serious nature had to be abandoned, and the plan ultimately agreed upon was for a single joint attack on as large a scale as possible on the Somme front. The decision to deliver a joint attack was taken in order that the offensive might be delivered on a really wide front, which would give the best chance of a break-through and ample scope for manœuvre should a break-through be effected. A joint operation having been decided on, questions of communications and supply pointed irresistibly to the Somme front, where the flanks of the Allied Armies would meet as soon as the projected reliefs had been carried out.

The battle scheme of the Allied operations as originally contemplated can be followed sufficiently clearly on the accompanying sketch.¹ The blow was to be delivered on a front of over 45 miles astride the Somme, the French employing 39 divisions on a front of over 30 miles, and the British as many divisions as were available up to a possible maximum of some 25 divisions. The more immediate object of the French was to gain the rising ground east of the Somme south of Péronne, while the corresponding British objective was the semicircle of high ground running from the neighbourhood of Le Transloy through Bapaume to Achiet-le-Grand. Once the Allied Armies had advanced eastwards to those positions, the direction of their main pressure would be turned outwards, the French seeking to roll up the German line to the south-east, while the British, moving north-east and north behind the German troops facing the Third and First British Armies, would roll up the German line on these fronts also. French and British cavalry would be pushed eastwards through the gap so made, in order to cover these operations.

It must not be inferred from the use of a word to which later battles have given a special meaning, that it was anticipated that the 'objectives' of the French and British

¹ For the details of this and later battles the reader is referred to the large-scale contoured maps issued with Dent's edition of *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches*.

Armies would be reached in the first assault. These Somme positions were objectives for the armies concerned, rather than for the troops from time to time engaged in the attack. They marked the stage at which it was thought that the penetration eastwards would be deep enough, and the position reached would be sufficiently defensible, in case of attack by German reserves, to enable the Allied Armies to turn their attention to the second stage of the battle, that is to say to the rolling up of the German forces on the flanks of the point of rupture.

No reliance was placed upon the swift onrush within the first twenty-four hours which later formed an essential part of the Nivelle plan of attack in 1917. The battle, as described by Joffre in his directive of June 21, was to be long and hard fought. Mangin, quoting this directive, says that after the experiences of 1915 the breaking through of organised defences could only be expected as the result of a wearing-out battle, methodically pursued.¹ The joint responsibility of the French for the battle of attrition, so much criticised in certain quarters in England, is thus established. It had cost the French much to learn this lesson.

While a methodical progression was contemplated, it is at the same time clear that the full success of the 1916 scheme of operations could not be attained unless the Allied Armies could push forward with sufficient speed to ensure that, the break-through having been effected, they would be able to turn outwards to the flanks before the German Armies to the north and south had had time to adjust themselves to the new situation. Anything short of this would mean further fighting and fewer captures.

Even though the resistance encountered should prove too strong to permit of an uninterrupted advance, it might still be possible to gain very valuable results. The enemy would not evacuate his prepared positions to the north and south of the battlefield until absolutely compelled. Accordingly, so long as steady progress was made on the battle front

¹ *Comment finit la Guerre*, p. 78.

towards the positions aimed at, and the German reserves were eaten up in the process—and so long of course as Allied pressure in other theatres limited the number of German reserves available—then, even though progress at first was slow, it was always possible that the actual rupture of the overstretched cord of German defence might at any moment come so suddenly that the rolling up of the German line would be practicable.

One thing stands out prominently in this scheme and distinguishes it in varying degree from the Ypres fighting of 1917, the British advance of 1918, and still more from the German attack of 1918. It was not primarily an operation to gain any particular place or district. Its real objective was in no sense geographical, but was the German Army itself. This characteristic was not changed by any of the modifications that the scheme subsequently underwent, but was rather intensified by them. As the pressure at Verdun grew and the Allied forces available for the Somme battle diminished, that part of their task which consisted in attracting as many German troops as possible to their front, and inflicting the maximum loss upon them, became of greater and greater moment.

In the summer and autumn of 1917, as will be explained in greater detail hereafter, the British strategic conception of the battle was partly geographical, i.e. the clearing of the Flanders coast, and partly the engagement and destruction of the German Army as an end in itself, as in 1916; though in 1917 geography played a part in this also, as geographical considerations made it impossible for the enemy to refuse battle. In the autumn of 1918 the British strategic conception was yet more largely geographical, being the attainment of a position astride the German line of communication at Maubeuge, while the French and Americans were still holding the German Armies south of the Ardennes. The strategic conception of the German attack of March 21, 1918, was almost wholly geographical, being the severing of the Allied Armies by the capture of Amiens, the pinning of the British Army to the Channel ports by means of a holding

force, and the occupation of Paris by the main German Armies.

The scheme of the Somme battle of 1916, even in its first inception, was the antithesis of this latter plan. Of course no land battle can be wholly divorced from considerations of geography, and so we find Joffre describing the aim of the operations as the carrying of a mass of manœuvre against the group of German communications running through Cambrai, Le Cateau, and Maubeuge.¹ It remains true, however, that the dominating idea was the capture, not of places, but of men and guns. No locality or town was of supreme or essential importance. Joffre's plan was designed to put into practice an old and approved doctrine of war, to seek out, engage and destroy the enemy's field forces. It was essentially a big scheme designed by a man who understood the basic principles of war. It would be a bold thing to deny it the possibility of success, had it been carried out as planned. Unfortunately, it never was so carried out. In it as originally conceived the rôle of the British Army was to have been rather that of the promising younger brother. Fate and the German attack at Verdun sent the British Army a very different part to play.

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As soon as the magnitude of the German effort at Verdun was understood, it became clear that the French and British plan described above for joint action on the Somme would have to be greatly modified. There was no suggestion of abandoning the plan, but it gradually became more and more evident that the operation would have to be rather in the nature of a counter-offensive to relieve the French at Verdun than a decisive attempt to end the war. As the French reserves, despite the relief of the Tenth French Army by the British, steadily disappeared into the furnace of Verdun, the share that the French could take in any relief offensive became smaller and smaller.

Corresponding changes took place in the British plans. The taking over of the new front in the Arras sector meant

¹ Compare this with the plan of the summer and autumn of 1918.

a reduction in the number of free divisions available for an offensive. As has been explained, all idea of a serious preparatory operation was given up, and it became a question how long the delivery of the main assault could be postponed. The longer it could be put off the better, not merely because every week, men, guns, and shells were accumulating—and there were none too many of any of the three and especially of shells—but because every week's training given to the new and untried troops added to the chances of success and to the hope of reducing casualties.

Under the original plan Sir Douglas Haig had been prepared, having regard to the promised rate at which men and guns were to be sent to him, to contemplate operations of one sort or another comparatively early in the year. When it became evident that the chief burden would fall on the British and that the chances of serious success would depend wholly on their efforts, he grew anxious to postpone the opening of his offensive until, if possible, the middle of August. By that time, having regard to the condition of the troops and also to the *actual* rate at which the promised guns and munitions were in fact arriving, he expected to be able to take the field with the maximum chance of success. The time lost would not be wasted, for it would mean that the offensive once started could be pushed more rapidly, with better trained troops and a greater weight of artillery fire, all of which would mean greater results at less cost in life.

On general grounds, of course, the earlier the offensive could be started the better, so as to have as many months as possible for its development before winter put a stop to operations. An attack in April would have brought the Verdun battle to an end at the close of its first phase, and would have left the French in a position to take an earlier and larger share in offensive operations. In the light of what was actually accomplished by the offensive commenced on July 1, six weeks or more before the date when Sir Douglas Haig considered that his preparations would be completed, there is little doubt that an attack at the end of May or June by a fully trained and equipped British Army, even

without more considerable French support, would have had very big results indeed. The state of the British military preparations, however, made any such action out of the question.

The British Commander-in-Chief neither got his reinforcements in time to employ them when they would have been of the most use, nor was space given him to train them, when they did come, so that they might be employed to the best advantage. Though Joffre loyally strove to postpone to the last minute calling upon the British Army, the pressure at Verdun became so great that the limit of the French resistance was set for the end of June. Accordingly, the British Commander-in-Chief had to make the best of circumstances as he found them.

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Sir Douglas Haig's action, first in taking over line from the French and then in agreeing to attack before he considered his preparations completed, are instances of the unity of plan and good accord prevailing between the Allied Higher Commands. The reluctance of the French to press the British to attack until the situation at Verdun was such as left them no choice, and their determination to fulfil their pledge to attack alongside of the British in such strength as they were able, are examples of the same spirit on the other side. The same harmony was present even in the more difficult matter of reserves. British divisions were offered to Joffre to help at Verdun, just as they were sent to help the French on the Soissons and Reims fronts in July 1918; and in the Somme battle itself French batteries were lent to the British to make good to some extent our deficiency in gun-power. As Sir Douglas Haig wrote to General Joffre at the end of May 1916, 'The question has to be considered as though there was only one Army on the Franco-British front.'¹

The fact is that throughout the whole of the events preceding the attack of July 1, and throughout all the events which followed, the two Commanders-in-Chief worked

¹ Quoted by Mangin, *Comment finit la Guerre*, p. 77.

together in the closest possible understanding and with the greatest goodwill. The measures which each took for the assistance of the other and the advancement of the common cause were such as each would have wished the other to take. The existence of a generalissimo could not have achieved a more perfect co-ordination of effort or greater unity of plan. Within the limits of responsibility which each Commander-in-Chief owed to his own people and his own country, General Joffre was in fact Generalissimo by common accord. Moreover, his authority extended into all theatres of war and was able to some extent at least to co-ordinate Allied effort on all fronts. On the other hand, nothing can deprive a Commander-in-Chief of his responsibility to his own Government : nothing can altogether remove the bar which differences of language, temperament, equipment, and customary food and drink impose upon the interchangeable or common use of troops drawn from the armies of different nations. Neither can there be any greater bond of union between allies in the field than the good understanding, mutual respect and mutual honesty of dealing between the Allied Commanders and Staffs. Between December 1915 and November 1918 there were changes in men, names, and nomenclature. There was only one serious attempt at a change of system, and that came to an end tacitly and automatically with the fall of Nivelle.

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In the modified battle scheme actually put into operation on July 1 the British delivered the principal assault on a front of about 15½ miles, employing 13 divisions in first line with another 6 divisions in close reserve, 2 of which came into action on the first day. The main effort was made on a front of about 10 miles between the Somme and the Ancre. This British attack was supported by a French attack on a front of about 8 miles (including about 2 miles of river) delivered by 5 divisions in first line. General Foch had another 11 divisions under his command, but they did not at this date take part in the battle. If these figures of 5 French divisions attacking on an effective front of some 6 miles

are compared with the original scheme of an attack by a force of 39 French divisions on a front of 30 miles, the full significance of the change produced by the German attack on Verdun, and the alteration effected in the respective rôles of the French and British Armies on the Somme, can be realised.

The general objectives of the Allies remained the same, except that for the moment it was sought to put only the British half into operation. That is to say, in the most favourable event the British aimed at gaining ultimately their position on the Le Transloy-Bapaume-Achiet line, and then, with the French covering their right flank and cavalry thrown out to their eastern front, they would turn the direction of their advance to the north-east and north behind the German defence lines. Subsidiary attacks on other portions of the British front would then have taken place to hold the enemy in these defence lines, and so increase the chance of large captures of men and guns by the British troops moving north behind them. How far the French would be able to do more than act as a protection to the British right would depend upon the course of events, and particularly upon the degree of rapidity with which the French troops recovered from the strain of Verdun.

It is clear that in these circumstances the chances of an effective break-through were very greatly reduced. None the less it was not thought necessary to rule out the possibility of big developments. If the likelihood of attaining a maximum success in the first stages of the battle had diminished, there was always the hope that the outlook would improve as the battle progressed. Later in the year, French help might reasonably be expected to become more effective. For this reason, that part of the original plan which provided that the French should operate along the north bank of the Somme, as well as to the south of the river, was left unchanged, although it entailed certain practical inconveniences. The Germans as well as the French had suffered at Verdun, and if the operation were pressed with skill and resolution the limit of German resistance might

yet be reached before the end of the year. In any event the prime motive of the attack, the destruction of the enemy's field forces, remained, and, if it had no other result, at least would bring relief to our Allies in all theatres.

A word of warning should be uttered here against drawing hasty inferences from comparisons of the situation at different periods of the war. Some people seem to find it incredible, having regard to the strength of the German resistance in 1917 and to the nearness with which the Germans came to decisive success in attack in the spring of 1918, that there could have been any real possibility of inflicting decisive defeat on them in 1916. There is in truth nothing at all incredible in the supposition, the fact being that the relative situations of the combatants in 1916, 1917 and 1918 are not really comparable. In 1916 Germany had to make head on three fronts, and had not yet developed her full strength in divisions. At one period in the battle her available reserves on the Western Front were reduced to 5 divisions, of which 2 were battle-weary, a margin more narrow than was reached at any subsequent period of the war prior to the final collapse.

The development of the battle alone could show to what degree of completeness the wearing out of the German forces could be carried, while to the element of uncertainty normally present in all military enterprises were added on this occasion several unknown factors of a special kind. Much still remained to be learnt concerning the power of modern field fortifications to resist modern methods of assault. Moreover, the very methods of attack to be employed—and of defence too for that matter—were still in their experimental stages. In fact, both underwent many modifications, both in the Allied and German Armies, as the war progressed.

Further, the events of the continuing struggle at Verdun were too recent to allow of complete understanding and assimilation throughout the Army of the lessons to be drawn from them. The importance of the concentration of artillery was indeed well known, but the extent to which it would be carried in the later stages of the battle and subsequently

could not have been foreseen at its commencement, and indeed was then physically impossible. The total number of British heavy guns in France on July 1, 1916, was some 730. By April 1917 (the date of the Arras attack) the number had risen to some 1570, and by the end of the war to over 2210. Nor was the mere number of guns the only factor to be considered in 1916. Throughout the whole of the Somme battle the greatest anxiety was felt as to whether ammunition supplies could be made to cover requirements. The greatest care and economy had to be observed at all times, and, despite the care taken, operations were much handicapped by want of a more generous supply of shells.

Finally, there was the question of how far new and incompletely trained troops would prove capable of the work before them; what technical skill they could be expected to develop; and the strain they could safely be called upon to bear. All these uncertainties, which could only be resolved by the event, called for a plan of campaign furnished with alternatives that could be adopted to suit circumstances as operations progressed.

The higher of these alternatives has already been discussed and the reasons given that made its achievement doubtful. The second and less favourable alternative was that the British front might be carried forward to the crest of the Ginchy-Thiepval ridge (which can be seen on the sketch map¹) and so established before winter in a strong and commanding position on high ground. It should be remembered that the threat to the connection and co-operation of the two Allied Armies, that became so vital and urgent in the spring of 1918 when the enemy advanced to Albert, existed in a degree less imminent, but scarcely less dangerous potentially, in 1916 when Albert was within a short two miles of the German lines. The capture of the Ginchy-Thiepval ridge, therefore, was an eminently desirable achievement. It would bring about a very considerable improvement and strengthening of our position tactically and also from a wider strategic point of view.

¹ Facing p. 98.

There was also the consideration that the command of the high ground, besides giving a line more comfortable to hold during the winter months, would enable a new offensive to be launched in the following year with far greater chances of success.

On the other hand, the enemy would not lightly let go the advantages of position both local and strategic that he had held for so long and fortified so elaborately. He would undoubtedly contest our bid for them with all his available strength, and could be made to lose many men in the process. It was a fair calculation, therefore, that even if the offensive achieved no further object locally than the capture of the ridge, the strain thrown upon the German Armies in its defence would be sufficient both to relieve Verdun and to prevent any substantial transfer of divisions from the Western to the Russian Front.

It was with these two alternatives in view, each based primarily on the principle that the destruction of the enemy in the field is the most certain way to achieve victory, that the first great British offensive in the west was undertaken. The one gave the hope of an early decision, the other the certainty of affording immediate relief to our Allies and of bringing ultimate victory a stage nearer.

The tactical intention of the Allied forces on July 1 was to engage the enemy's attention over a broad front, extending at its widest limits from the Amiens-Brie road to Gommecourt, and to enter his defences as far as possible along the whole line engaged. In these early days of rear organisation, the enemy could not be expected to overlook our preparations for an offensive, but by this method he might at least be kept uncertain on what sector the chief weight of our assault would fall, and so be prevented from concentrating the fire of his guns upon it. Any increase in weight of men and metal that might have been gained by confining our whole effort to a narrower front would have sacrificed this element of surprise and been more than counterbalanced by the corresponding advantages accruing to the defence.

The events of July 1 and following days bore out the

calculations of the British Higher Command and amply justified the tactical methods employed. Misled by the extent of front threatened, and convinced that the French Army was used up by the Verdun battle and incapable of serious attack, the enemy expected that the main British effort would be made in the northern sector of the threatened front, astride the Ancre. He made his preparations accordingly. His troops in this sector were on the watch, and his artillery arrangements enabled the attack of the VIIIth British Corps to be subjected to very heavy flanking fire from German batteries in the valleys north of Serre. As regards the front south of the Somme, the French artillery preparation was thought to be a mere diversion intended to distract attention from the British front farther north.

As might be expected in the circumstances, the principal successes were gained on the right half of the attack, the deepest penetration being by the French south of the Somme, where the surprise of the German garrisons was so complete that they temporarily lost their heads.¹ North of the river, the XXth French Corps, Congreve's XIIth Corps, and Horne's XVth Corps each made almost equal progress, gaining a line from the Somme at Curlu to and including Montauban to north of Fricourt. Fricourt itself, though still held by the enemy at the end of the first day's fighting, was being skilfully and successfully 'pinched' by the 7th and 21st British Divisions, assisted towards evening by the 17th Division, by whom the site of the village itself was occupied on the following morning.

In the centre also valuable gains were made by Pultney's IIIrd Corps, the German defences between La Boisselle and Ovillers being driven in and the way prepared for the ultimate reduction of both villages. The remainder of the front of attack, however, provided an example of what would seem, judged by the experience not only of our own but of all armies in the recent war in the west, to be the almost invariable result of the first attack made by brave but partly trained and inexperienced troops upon established

¹ Falkenhayn's *General Headquarters, 1914-1916*, p. 205. (Hutchinson.)

field fortifications, well manned and stubbornly defended by watchful garrisons.

The troops detailed for the assault reached and entered the enemy's positions along practically the whole line of attack, but no adequate arrangements were made, or at least none were properly carried out, for clearing up and securing the ground won. All along the front parties of our troops succeeded in pushing forward to great depths across the German positions, but these advanced bodies lost touch with or were not properly supported by the troops behind them. The enemy was able to reoccupy trenches that had been overrun and, being no longer driven to ground by our bombardment, succeeded in too many cases in holding up our reserves and reinforcements.

Men of the 34th Division on the IIIrd Corps front reached Contalmaison. On the Xth Corps front, where our permanent gains were of the slightest, parties of the 36th Division reached Grandcourt, and a brigade of the 49th Division were able to attack *from the north* the fortified village of Thiepval, into which our troops had already penetrated from the south and west.

North of the Ancre, the story is the same. Despite the greater width of no-man's-land and a murderous flanking fire from the north, the enemy's first system of trenches was entered and pierced. Troops of the 29th Division reached points well to the south-east of Beaumont Hamel and entered the southern portion of the village itself. Detachments of 4 battalions of the 4th Division reached the German support lines and pushed beyond them as far as Pendant Copse south-east of Serre. Serre itself was reached and probably even entered by troops of the 31st Division, for the enemy was observed to turn his guns upon the village.

These were great distances, and their achievement the result of brilliant individual effort, combined with wonderful gallantry on the part of the troops concerned. Yet all these gains were lost before the day was out, and many thousands of brave men with them. Many explanations have been given to account for what happened, and many criticisms

have been levelled against the higher direction of the battle, the tactics employed, and in particular the use made of the artillery. Yet the explanation can be given in a phrase— inexperience and insufficient training.

It may be granted that the uses of the creeping barrage were not then fully understood. This powerful aid to the attack seems to have made its appearance on the French front for the first time at the end of June 1916, and, like all innovations in war, was not perfect in its first form. Not only was a very high degree of training and skill demanded of the artillery personnel, but the infantry had to be taught to follow close up to the belt of bursting shells. Towards the end of the Somme battle the British creeping barrage showed great improvement, and by the end of the war can fairly be said to have approached perfection. At all times our gunners were well ahead of the enemy in this branch of their art. For its use to be effective, however, it was essential that the infantry should have the utmost confidence in the skill of the artillery supporting them, and undoubtedly in these early days both skill and confidence were lacking.

The facts of the fighting of July 1 cannot be accounted for, however, by ascribing them to a faulty use of artillery, neither is it fair criticism to allege without explanation that the use the French made of their artillery gave better results than were achieved by ours. On the much narrower front on which the French attacked they concentrated a mass of heavy artillery substantially greater than the total British resources in that essential arm at that date in France. It has been seen that on July 1 there were but some 730 heavy guns on the whole British front from Ypres to the Somme. In support of his attack on an effective front of some six miles, Foch was able to employ no less than 900 heavy pieces.¹ So superior was the French artillery position that during the battle they were able to lend us guns and they had no serious anxiety about ammunition. Their

¹ Maugin, *Comment finit la Guerre*, p. 77. Another French writer, Louis Madelin, says that Foch had 2000 guns.

provision of shells of all kinds for one month's fighting totalled six and a half million rounds.

The British shell position was very different. Despite all exertions at home and the utmost economy in France, the stock of ammunition accumulated for the battle was no more than the barest sufficiency, and left no margin at all for contingencies. When, therefore, after the bombardment had started on June 24, bad weather interfered with observation and made it necessary to postpone the assault for two days, the prolongation of the bombardment from five days to seven could only be achieved on the British front by a reduction in the intensity of our fire. Instead, therefore, of a bombardment increasing in violence up to the moment of assault, there had to be a marked slackening of fire in the midst of the artillery preparation. Such a slackening could not but have a most prejudicial effect on the chances of success in the assault, for it meant that the defenders were given a breathing space, in which their moral might recover and food and ammunition be brought up.

It speaks volumes for the skilful use made of such artillery resources as we possessed, and even more for the courage and determination of our infantry that, despite these several disadvantages, in the sectors between the Somme and Fricourt where the conditions of attack and defence on the respective fronts were comparable, the progress made by the British was on the whole greater than the advance made by the French. On the British front, limited artillery resources with inadequate reserves of ammunition were allotted as best they could be to the many tasks that artillery is called upon to perform in the preparation for and support of an attack. Proof of this is afforded by the fact that under cover of our guns our troops did everywhere succeed in entering, and in many cases penetrating deeply into, the enemy's positions. The trouble came afterwards, when the deep German dugouts disgorged the troops and machine guns that had taken refuge below ground from our bombardment, and no British troops were there to deal with the enemy as they emerged.

A much greater intensity and weight of gunfire would have failed then as later to blow in all entrances to the German dugouts, and no weight of artillery then available could have wrecked the deeper dugouts themselves. Experience and training in the art of advancing close under the fire of the guns, in the quick finding and safe guarding of all entrances to dugouts by troops specially detailed for these tasks, and in seeing that these troops did their jobs thoroughly and conscientiously proved the answer to the deep dugout. In July 1916 few of our troops had had this experience, and the matter is one in which precept is of little avail unless backed by abundant practice.

The action of the IIInd American Corps in the attack on the Bellicourt tunnel defences on September 29, 1918—an attack supported by a far vaster weight and intensity of artillery fire employing gas as well as high explosive shell—is an interesting parallel and instructive commentary upon the failure of the left of the British attack on the Somme on July 1, 1916. The Americans had the advantage of the repeated and urgent warnings given by their British comrades in arms, and special training based on British experience. They were engaged against an enemy whose moral had been shaken by repeated defeats and was on the point of breaking down utterly. Yet, as will be seen when the time comes to deal with this battle, they repeated the mistakes made by the British in the Ancre sector in 1916, and but for the presence of the Australian divisions behind them would have encountered a like fate.

Doubtless there were other causes that contributed to our non-success in certain localities. In war mistakes are inevitable, and lack of experience of novel conditions of fighting was not confined to the rank and file. The failure of the subsidiary attack at Gommecourt must be ascribed, in part at least, to the faulty handling of the supporting troops of the 46th Division in the northern portion of the attack. With the idea of securing protection and avoiding casualties, the attempt was made to bring these troops forward through the communication trenches instead of

across the open, with the result that the trenches became hopelessly blocked, the assault troops were left unsupported, and such of the support troops as succeeded at last in getting forward were met by a withering fire from trenches and strong posts which their slow advance had given the enemy time to reoccupy. So far as this division was concerned, our want of success was clearly due to a lack of adequate knowledge of and training in the offensive tactics suited to the new type of fighting. It is the more interesting to note that it was this same division which, a little more than two years later, carried out at Bollenglise one of the most skilfully organised and brilliantly successful attacks of the whole war.

Further, it is conceivable that north of the Ancre the German guns in the Serre valleys might have been subjected to heavier counter-battery work. In this connection, however, it is only fair to remember how limited was the number of heavy guns available for the British offensive. Moreover, the position of the German batteries made effective counter-battery work difficult, and the same trouble was experienced to some extent in the November attack on this front, when Beaumont Hamel was captured, though many more guns were then available. The greater distance separating the opposing lines north of the Ancre was another factor operating against the success of the attack on this front ; but, next to the greater strength and watchfulness of the enemy in the Ancre sector where it was expected that the main British effort would be made, our ill fortunes must chiefly be attributed to a neglect of precautions, which, from the American example, it would seem that only personal experience can teach.

The right half of the Allied attack having gained its objectives, while on the left no permanent progress had been made, the British Commander-in-Chief decided, as we learn from the Despatches, to concentrate his efforts against the sector where the enemy had been found to be weakest. Along the whole front from the Somme to the Albert-Bapaume road there was evidence as the day wore on of great confusion behind the enemy's lines. The German

troops that had escaped death or capture were few and disorganised, and had a strong force of fresh divisions been ready to push forward at once there is little doubt that a considerable further advance could have been made. Neither on the French nor British fronts were reserves present in sufficient strength to take full advantage of the opportunity, but in the British sector the decision to press on with all available resources where the gap had been made led to results which fully justified the course followed.

The first German defensive system having been broken through on this front, Sir Douglas Haig hoped that by vigorous action it might be possible to capture the second system and gain the crest of the ridge before the enemy could bring up reinforcements or complete new lines of defence. The formidable Thiepval works would then be turned from the south-east. They could thereafter be taken at far less cost than would inevitably have been incurred by a second frontal attack.

Though, for reasons which will become apparent as this account proceeds, the advance in the active sector of the battle front proceeded less rapidly than had been hoped, the progress made there did result in the turning of the Thiepval positions and led to their capture under comparatively favourable conditions. Yet the decision to proceed by this method met with strenuous opposition from the French Commander-in-Chief. General Joffre's wish was to renew the attack at once frontally on the Thiepval positions, and on July 3 he urged this plan upon Sir Douglas Haig with the utmost vigour. There appears to be an impression in some quarters that the British tactics on the Somme were characterised by a stubborn obstinacy that sacrificed countless lives in constantly repeated frontal attacks, while the French gained their successes by skill of manoeuvre and economy of men. It is therefore of no small interest to find that at the very outset of the battle it was the French Commander who advocated the very tactics for which his British colleague has so often been blamed, and the British General who, refusing in this instance to be

overborne by the authority which Joffre strove to exert as *de facto* Generalissimo, adopted and successfully carried out the more prudent, skilful and less costly plan. It will be seen later on that on another and parallel occasion Sir Douglas Haig displayed with like success a similar firmness and foresight in refusing to adopt at the instance of the Generalissimo *de jure*, Marshal Foch, a plan of direct attack which he knew to be faultily conceived. In the present instance, had General Joffre's wishes been followed a great part of the advantages gained on July 1 would have been thrown away. A second and immediate frontal attack on the Thiepval positions would necessarily have been undertaken under far more unfavourable conditions than had been present when the first assault was made. All hope of effecting a surprise was gone. The enemy was thoroughly awake, and had learnt the strength and weakness of his defence. On the British side, it was impossible to expect that divisions, weakened by the losses they had incurred in the first attack and without the assistance of adequate artillery preparation, could accomplish at a second attempt what they had failed to achieve when fresh and after the enemy's defences had been subjected to a seven days' bombardment.

On the other hand, if a deliberate attack had been made with reserve divisions and after fresh artillery preparation with all available guns, a method which alone could have given any substantial chance of success, it would have been impossible to follow up at once our advantage on the right of the battle front, since our resources were not great enough to combine the two operations. The consequent delay would have been of the utmost value to the enemy. The gap we had made on the right would have been speedily sealed and the Thiepval positions strengthened by the arrival of fresh German divisions and batteries. In such circumstances a second frontal attack, however carefully mounted, might have proved no more successful and even more costly than the first.

It is fair to assume that some such considerations as these

were present to Sir Douglas Haig's mind when he decided to follow his own views rather than General Joffre's, and to press on where conditions were most favourable. Speed was the essence of success. Accordingly, on the morning of July 2 the Xth and VIIIth Corps had been transferred from Rawlinson's Fourth Army to Gough's Reserve Army, with instructions to Gough to pursue a slow and methodical advance south of the Ancre, while all available reserves and all the guns that could be spared were concentrated upon the right of the battle front.

In this way General Bridges's 19th Division and General Babington's 23rd Division were brought in on the IIIrd Corps front, and by dint of heavy fighting made progress between Contalmaison and La Boisselle, opening out the left of our advance. Our whole line was steadily pushed forward and, while these and other necessary reliefs were carried out, measures were put in hand for attacks on the objectives, Maltz Horn Farm, Trônes Wood, Mametz Wood, Contalmaison, Bailiff Wood, and Ovillers, the possession of which would give us the desired jumping-off positions for a general advance on the German main second line of defence.

In the course of these operations occurred one of those incidents which can scarcely be foreseen or provided against in war, yet have so often most far-reaching effects upon the course of a campaign. Mametz Wood, covering the crest and upper slopes of a southwards-jutting spur about midway between Trônes Wood and Ovillers, was the key to these positions. Its capture was essential, both to avoid a dangerous salient in our lines which would be very vulnerable to counter-attacks organised behind the cover of the wood, and also to provide forward artillery positions for the support of our attack upon the enemy's second defence system.

On July 7 the XVth and IIIrd Corps attacked in conjunction with Gough's Xth Corps from Mametz Wood to Ovillers, and on July 8 the XIIIth Corps attacked Trônes Wood, acting in conjunction with the French attack on Hardecourt. The 30th Division established themselves firmly in the southern portion of Trônes Wood and in the

early morning of July 9 took Maltz Horn Farm, due north of Hardecourt, which the French held. Meanwhile, in the morning of the 7th the 23rd Division had taken Contalmaison, the 19th Division on their left had also gained their objectives, and troops of the 25th and 12th Divisions made progress in the outskirts of Owillers and in the trenches lying between that village and La Boisselle.

In the centre, however, the attack of the 38th Division on Mametz Wood failed, the advance of the 17th Division on their left was swept by fire from Mametz Wood and held up, and, lacking support on their right, the 23rd Division were later in the day forced back from Contalmaison. The 38th Division were ordered to repeat their attack on the afternoon of July 7, and again on the morning of the 8th, when the 17th also attacked; but the situation at Mametz Wood remained unchanged. Further orders were given to the 38th Division to gain a footing in Mametz Wood on the afternoon of the 8th and to exploit their gains on the morning of the 9th. No attack took place, and the 23rd Division, who on that afternoon had again succeeded in entering Contalmaison, were for a second time unable to maintain their position.

On July 9 General Watts assumed temporary command of the 38th Division, and that night three battalions of this same division entered Mametz Wood and gained the central ridge running east and west across the spur. The 17th Division advanced at the same time up the west side of the wood, and on the 10th, after strong German reinforcements had been engaged and stopped by our guns, our troops worked their way to within forty yards of the northern edge of the wood. On the same day Contalmaison was taken for the third time by the 23rd Division and held. The remaining strip of Mametz Wood was occupied on July 12 by the 7th Division, who had relieved the 38th on the previous day, and the position required for our assault on the German second line system had at length been reached.

Our failure to secure Mametz Wood at an earlier date had an important influence on the course of the battle. The

days lost here were of the greatest value to the enemy. They gave him the opportunity he needed to restore order among his defeated battalions, to bring up fresh troops and to reorganise his defences. Though he could not prevent us from carrying his second line system in our next assault, he was enabled so to strengthen his last remaining defences on the crest and reverse slopes of the ridge beyond that our advance was held up there when within measurable distance of effecting an actual break-through.

There is little risk of exaggerating the effect of three days' delay at this stage of the battle, when every hour was of importance. To be seen in its right perspective the incident must be viewed from the standpoint of July 14, when a most brilliant operation came within an ace of achieving a great victory. It is for this reason, and for this reason only, that attention is now drawn to facts which the official Despatches *pass over in silence*. *Knowledge of them is essential to a full appreciation of the magnificent achievement of our new citizen army in this its first great fight; as well as to a proper understanding of the correctness of the views and decisions taken by the British Commander-in-Chief regarding both the original possibilities of the battle and the manner in which its course should be directed and controlled.*

The sketch facing page 93 shows in black lines the position and extent of the German defences on the Somme battle front at the end of June 1916. Behind the second defence system running through the Bazentin and Longueval can be seen an incomplete third line system and beyond that there is nothing. On July 14 our troops broke through the last completed defence line and at High Wood reached the crest of the ridge overlooking the half-finished line running through Fiers. For a moment it seemed as though the German front would be completely pierced. Certainly, could our hold on the ridge have been extended to the east where our cavalry endeavoured to push their way forward, and could High Wood have been finally cleared and held, an attack on the Fiers line could have been pressed on with excellent chances

of breaking through to the open country. The narrowness of the margin by which the German line was saved at this point is the measure of the value of the days lost at Mametz Wood.

The main attack on July 14 was carried out by the 9th and 3rd Divisions of the XIIIth Corps (W. T. Fuze and J. A. Haldane) and the 7th and 21st Divisions of the XVth Corps (H. E. Watts and D. G. M. Campbell), while on their right Maxse's 18th Division cleared the remainder of Trônes Wood, and on their left the 1st Division (E. P. Strickland) and Ingouville-Williams's 34th Division formed a defensive flank between Bazentin-le-Petit Wood and Contalmaison. The outstanding feature of the operation on the XIIIth and XVth Corps fronts was a long advance over the open before daybreak to the positions of assault, the enemy's main position being some distance from the line held by our troops. This most difficult task, especially difficult for young and inexperienced troops, was successfully accomplished under cover of strong patrols, the correct deployment of the troops engaged being ensured by means of white tapes which were laid out on the ground during the earlier part of the night. In this way the troops of one division had to make a preliminary advance of 1400 yards, for the first 1000 yards of which they were guided by tapes leading towards the enemy's positions. They were then aligned on other tapes laid parallel to the positions to be assaulted and covered the last 400 yards of their advance to their assault positions by crawling forwards.

The attack proved as successful in execution as in conception it was bold ; and our troops rapidly gained possession of the German second line system on the whole front of the assault. Early in the afternoon, the 7th Division reported that the enemy's troops were beginning to show those signs of disorder which are a prelude to the breaking down of resistance, and that it would be possible to advance to High Wood. The opportunity was seized as rapidly as the difficult nature of the ground would allow, and in the late afternoon a squadron of the 7th Dragoon Guards, Secunderabad

Brigade, moved forward on the flanks of the 7th Division which entered High Wood at about 8 P.M. Other squadrons of the 7th Dragoon Guards and of the Deccan Horse picqueted the high ground between Delville Wood and High Wood, while the whole of High Wood itself, with the exception of its northern corner, was cleared of the enemy.

High Wood, situated on the very crest of the ridge, represented an advance of two miles from our old positions. Held by our troops, it threatened the safety of the whole German battle line, opening out to us the slopes and spurs falling away northwards to the eastern arm of the upper Ancre valley, with Bapaume and the Loupart Wood on the rising ground beyond. But the opportunity had come too late. Through the northern corner of the wood and along the high ground to the east and west there now stretched switch lines which barred the passage of our troops, while the gathering strength of the enemy's reserves showed itself in counter-attacks of increasing violence and determination. After holding High Wood for a night and a day, our troops were withdrawn a distance of about a mile to the general line of the Longueval-Bazentin road. Though by the end of the month we had again worked our way forward to the southern point of the Wood, it was not until September 15, two months after we first entered it, that the Wood was gained and the crest with it.

In the course of those two months, trench systems, switch lines, strong points, and belts of wire were multiplied across the whole space from High Wood to Bapaume. That was a part of the price paid for the check at Mametz Wood.

* * * * *

With the holding up of the British attack of July 14 the first stage of the Battle of the Somme comes to an end. The attempt to force a gap through the German defence lines by a series of powerful attacks pressed forward rapidly, before the enemy could bring reserves to the threatened front in sufficient strength to bar our progress, had definitely failed, though it had not failed by much. On July 18 the

enemy had 138 battalions engaged in and behind the battle line north of the Somme, as compared with 62 at the commencement of the battle. Six German divisions had been located on the front attacked by us on July 1. By July 16 the enemy had brought in 8 fresh divisions to reinforce or replace those subjected to our attacks, and, as the result of our recent assaults, fresh divisions were being hurried up. By the end of July the number of German reinforcements had risen to 18 divisions, and by the end of August to 30 divisions.

Such a massing of German reserves necessarily implied a change in the character of the battle, but already one of the objects of the offensive had been gained. The German pressure at Verdun had ceased, and from July 20 onwards it was the French who attacked at Verdun. The remaining offensive power of the German Army had perforce been transferred to the Somme, and was wasting itself in fruitless and costly counter-attacks.

A glance at the sketch facing page 126 will help to visualise the position on July 16 on the Somme front. South of the river, the French offensive had already come to an end. After their first gallant and fortunate onrush which in nine days carried them to Biaches, there was no material change on this front until September. South of the Somme, the battle had taken the form of a sudden stroke like the French battles of 1915. The battle of attrition, the wearing-out battle, was limited to that sector of the battle front which lay north of the river.

Here the French front on July 16 ran in a northerly direction from Hem to Hardecourt, joining the British right about 1000 yards north of the western outskirts of the latter village. The British line continued still in a northerly direction along the eastern edge of Trônes Wood to Delville Wood and Longueval. There it turned abruptly west to Bazentin-le-Petit and the southern outskirts of Pozzières.

It was obvious that the sharp salient formed by our front south and west from Delville Wood was very open to counter-attack, and it was here that the first big German

counter-stroke fell on July 18. This attempt to drive in the salient failed, as is well known ; but it is evident that the first object of the British effort would have to be directed to relieving this dangerous situation.

There were two courses open to the British Command. At this date our deepest advance had been made in a northerly direction. Our troops were still climbing steadily towards the crest of the ridge, and the Thiépval positions were already threatened from the flank and rear. It would have been possible to have formed on the British right a defensive flank resting ultimately on the Combles valley, and to have developed our principal attack northwards across and along the ridge. Such an attack would have taken the German defence lines in flank. It would have had the further advantage of freeing automatically the British communications from the congestion to which, by reason of the presence of the French north of the river, they were exposed in increasing degree as we made progress to the east.

To have adopted this plan, however, would have meant abandoning the idea of continuing the offensive as a joint operation in close association with the French. That is to say, it would have postponed indefinitely all hope of developing at some future date the original French scheme for operations south of Péronne. On the other hand, the closing of the German attacks at Verdun would give many French divisions time to rest and refit. The French share in the battle of attrition was now reduced to a single corps front, and made small demands on the French reserves. It followed that in course of time the French should be in a position to take a more important share in the Somme battle, and perhaps even to develop their original plan of operations. It was indeed in view of this possibility that the British had agreed at the outset that the sector of the attack immediately north of the river should be undertaken by a French corps, the French representing that any future operations against Mont St. Quentin or the other high ground covering Péronne to the north must be in the hands that controlled the

operations south of Péronne and east of the river. In this they were probably right, for our own experience in 1918 tended to confirm this view.

These considerations decided the British Commander-in-Chief to turn away from the attractive scheme of a British attack northwards, and to devote his main efforts to gaining further ground to the east, in co-operation with the French. Accordingly, the boundary between the Fourth and Reserve Armies was readjusted, and further operations against Pozières were handed over to General Gough.

The violent German reaction of July 18 was followed on July 23 by an attack by the Fourth Army and the right of the Reserve Army on a wide front from Guilleumont to the neighbourhood of Pozières. The operation did not obtain the success hoped for, its results confirming the impression of July 18 that the real trial of strength between the opposing armies had now come. It was therefore decided to adopt slower methods, and orders were issued that our troops should limit their efforts for the present to securing with as little delay as possible certain definite points, the possession of which would enable us at a later date to renew the attempt to break through the German lines.

The difference in method displayed during the next six weeks in this British battle, as compared with the method followed by the French in their earlier offensives, marks the true inauguration of the wearing-out battle. The French method was one of isolated efforts, separated by intervals of comparative quiescence during which, to be sure, our Allies were able to rest and reorganise their divisions, but the enemy was also able to do the same with his and to build new defences at his leisure. By this method the initial advantage which in the absence of surprise is enjoyed by the defence was perpetuated, while the spirit of the attackers was undermined by a succession of disjointed and comparatively profitless assaults. The British method gave the enemy no rest from the opening of the battle till winter made big operations impracticable, and even during the winter, as will be seen hereafter, raids and minor operations kept the

enemy under an unceasing strain. This was the real test of endurance, the battle of attrition. While the attackers preserved the initiative, and so were themselves able to rest to some extent between the attacks and key themselves up for the assault, the defenders were under immediate expectation of attack at any hour for weeks and months at a stretch. The fact that every attack made some progress, be it great or small, had its inevitable effect on both attackers and attacked. On the one side was the confident belief that ground would be gained, and that every step forward brought ultimate victory nearer. On the other side, a growing fear that in the end their powers of resistance must give out, and the German front be broken under the inexorable pressure incessantly exerted against it, sapped the resolution of the defenders. Ludendorff's references to the Somme battle are eloquent of this.

It is obvious from the facts already given that the wearing-out battle, in 1916 as in 1917, was sustained almost wholly by the British. General Joffre's directive already quoted, that it was necessary to expect a long and hard-fought battle, applied, so far as the French were concerned, only to their single corps front on the north bank of the Somme. One must, however reluctantly, insist on this truth, if only because of the entirely misleading presentations of the Somme fighting that have been put forward from time to time elsewhere.

A popular French writer, Louis Madelin, has elaborated an interesting theory to account for the success of the British right on July 1 and subsequent days. He says¹ that Rawlinson met with such resistance on his left that he could make no progress worth mentioning; but that his centre carried Mametz and invested Fricourt, while his right, '*entraînée par l'élan des troupes françaises voisines*' took Montauban and so penetrated deeply into the enemy's first positions. 'On the French side, success knew no limits. Two magnificent corps delivered the assault; north of the Somme, Balfourier's tireless XXth Corps, and to the south,

¹ *Le Chemin de la Victoire*, Louis Madelin, p. 188

the 1st Corps Colonial, led into battle by the young General Berdoulat.'

The action of the French corps south of the river has already been dealt with. Supported by a great weight of artillery, they attacked an enemy who dreamt of nothing less than attack, shook the serenity of the local German command into panic-stricken confusion, and in nine days reached the borders of the Somme opposite Péronne. There their effort ended, and for more than seven weeks the French front south of the Somme scarcely counted in the battle.

But north of the Somme? 'In a single bound,' says Madelin, 'the XXth Corps, *carrying the British right with them*, leapt upon the enemy's first positions. Fayolle's remarkable artillery preparation had in part paralysed the defence, but the infantry, on the other hand, showed themselves capable of overthrowing everything that remained capable of offering resistance.'

After this description it will come perhaps somewhat as a surprise to the uninstructed British reader to be told that the capture of Montauban, which the British are represented as having taken on July 1 in the swirl, as it were, of the French onrush, represents an advance of over 2000 yards, and that a depth of advance of 2000 yards was maintained by the British on a front of some 5000 yards from Montauban to Mametz. The depth of the French advance on this day on our immediate right was rather less than 1000 yards. The maximum French advance north of the Somme on that day occurred about the centre of their line, and was nearly equal to the depth of the British advance at Montauban. The whole front of the French attack north of the Somme was approximately 3000 yards in length. Hardecourt, a fortified village on the left of the French sector which exerted a considerable influence on the fortunes of the British right flank, was taken by the French on July 8. Its capture represents an advance of about 2000 yards. On the same day our troops were fighting at Maltz Horn Farm, about 1500 yards to the north of Hardecourt and 2500 yards from the nearest point in our old line (we captured the

position before the following morning), and also at Trônes Wood and Mametz Wood, some 3000 yards from the line of our departure. These are the facts, and it is an injustice to our troops and to our leaders that such facts should not be known when writers like Louis Madelin are claiming readers on both sides of the Channel.

In the fighting subsequent to July 23, the interaction of the Allied forces north of the Somme continued to be the source of many difficulties. The relations between both commanders and troops were at all times excellent; but the co-ordination of operations undertaken by troops speaking a different language, differently organised, and with different methods of fighting must always present special problems. From the point of view of the British Army these were increased by the fact that from the nature of the ground the advance of the British right was even more dependent upon the progress made by the French left than was the converse. Despite the greatest care and forethought, it was not always found possible so to co-ordinate operations that the flanks of both Armies should move forward together.

On the British front, this period of the *bataille d'usure* was occupied in accordance with the decision above referred to in a long series of limited operations having for their objectives the gaining of Guillemont (XIIIth Corps), Delville Wood (XIIIth Corps), the high ground between Delville Wood and High Wood (XVth Corps), and the prolongation of the ridge between High Wood and Pozières (IIIrd Corps). The Reserve Army continued its operations against Pozières. The greater part of Delville Wood and the orchards north of Longueval were gained by heavy fighting on July 27 and 29. The capture of Pozières on July 23 and 24 was followed in the first week of August by operations which gave us the German positions on the ridge above the village, and about the same period (July 24 to August 5) our positions between Pozières and High Wood were pushed forward till our troops were able to look down on Martinpuich on the northern slopes of the ridge. Operations of a similar kind were con-

tinued throughout August, gaining ground gradually and maintaining constant pressure on the enemy, while we ourselves were doing all that we could do to economise men and shells for more important operations in September.

The progress made on the joint front of the Allied forces facing east was less satisfactory. The junction of the French and British Armies was an obvious point of weakness, and it was in this sector the enemy delivered his most determined counter-attacks. The operations of July 23 had made no progress towards Guillemont, the strongest centre of resistance on the British front, and the French were now experiencing an equal difficulty in making progress beyond Hardecourt.

Between Hardecourt, at the southern end of a spur sloping southwards from a ridge of higher ground which connected the southern portion of Trônes Wood with Guillemont, and Maurepas, at the point of a long spur running south-west from just east of Combles, lies the lower portion of the Combles valley, from which at this point branches run northwards in the direction of Guillemont. The forward boundary between the zones of operations of the two armies ran from a point north of Hardecourt eastwards across those branches, and then along to the northern slopes of the Combles valley to Combles. The lie of the ground is such that the southern slopes of the Trônes Wood-Guillemont ridge, in the British sector, are commanded from Maurepas, and at shorter range from the spur which forms the northern bank of the Combles valley. At the southern point of this last-mentioned spur was the German strong point known as Falfemont Farm, also commanded from and itself in turn overlooking the longer but slightly lower Maurepas spur.

In the early morning of July 30, the XIIIth Corps attacked Guillemont and Falfemont Farm, in conjunction with an attack by the XXth French Corps. The 2nd Bn. Royal Scots Fusiliers fought their way into and through Guillemont and held on to its defences till 2.30 P.M. They were then forced to fall back, and except for some small British gains east and south-east of Trônes Wood, no permanent progress was made

either on the British or French front. Another attack by the XIIIth Corps on August 8 had much the same result. Our troops once more entered Guillemont, but were unable to hold it owing to our failure to secure the ground south of the village; while our troops attacking in this latter area were similarly handicapped by the fact that the French had not yet been able to secure Maurepas and the German defences between Maurepas and the British right.

Urged by the experiences of these first attempts, Rawlinson and Foch entered into a new agreement for a series of combined attacks to be delivered in successive stages, and these co-ordinated operations ultimately succeeded in carrying forward both the French and the British line. It was not, however, till August 12 that the French gained the southern portion of Maurepas, and the capture of the remainder of the village was not completed till twelve days later. Meanwhile, on August 12, 16, 18 and 21, the British, acting in conjunction with local operations on the French front also, had succeeded in pushing their line forward close up to the western defences of Guillemont, Guillemont station being captured on August 18.

On the remainder of the British front the policy of making ground by a succession of small advances that ate their way slowly but surely into the enemy's defences had been continued, and in the aggregate had resulted in substantial progress. Before the end of August our troops were established well to the east and north of Delville Wood, we had a solid footing on the high ground between Delville Wood and High Wood, held the southern portion of High Wood itself, had gained the crest of the ridge between Pozieres and Martinpuich, and were working our way towards Thiepval from the south.

The moment was now approaching when it would be possible to change the nature of the battle once more, and to make a second effort to open a breach in the enemy's defence lines by a succession of powerful blows. To be sure, new systems of defence were now multiplied thickly before us on the whole battle front; but on the other hand the

German garrisons were wearied and discouraged by constant unsuccessful efforts to arrest our advance, and we were shortly to have at our service a new instrument of war which promised to make wire and trenches of small account. Moreover, the methodical policy pursued by us for the past six or seven weeks, combined with the natural increase in the rate at which men and munitions were reaching us from home, had enabled the British Commander-in-Chief to economise reserves sufficient to justify the attempt; while our Allies, now rested from the strain of Verdun, were in a position to take a larger share in the battle. The second round in the struggle was about to open.

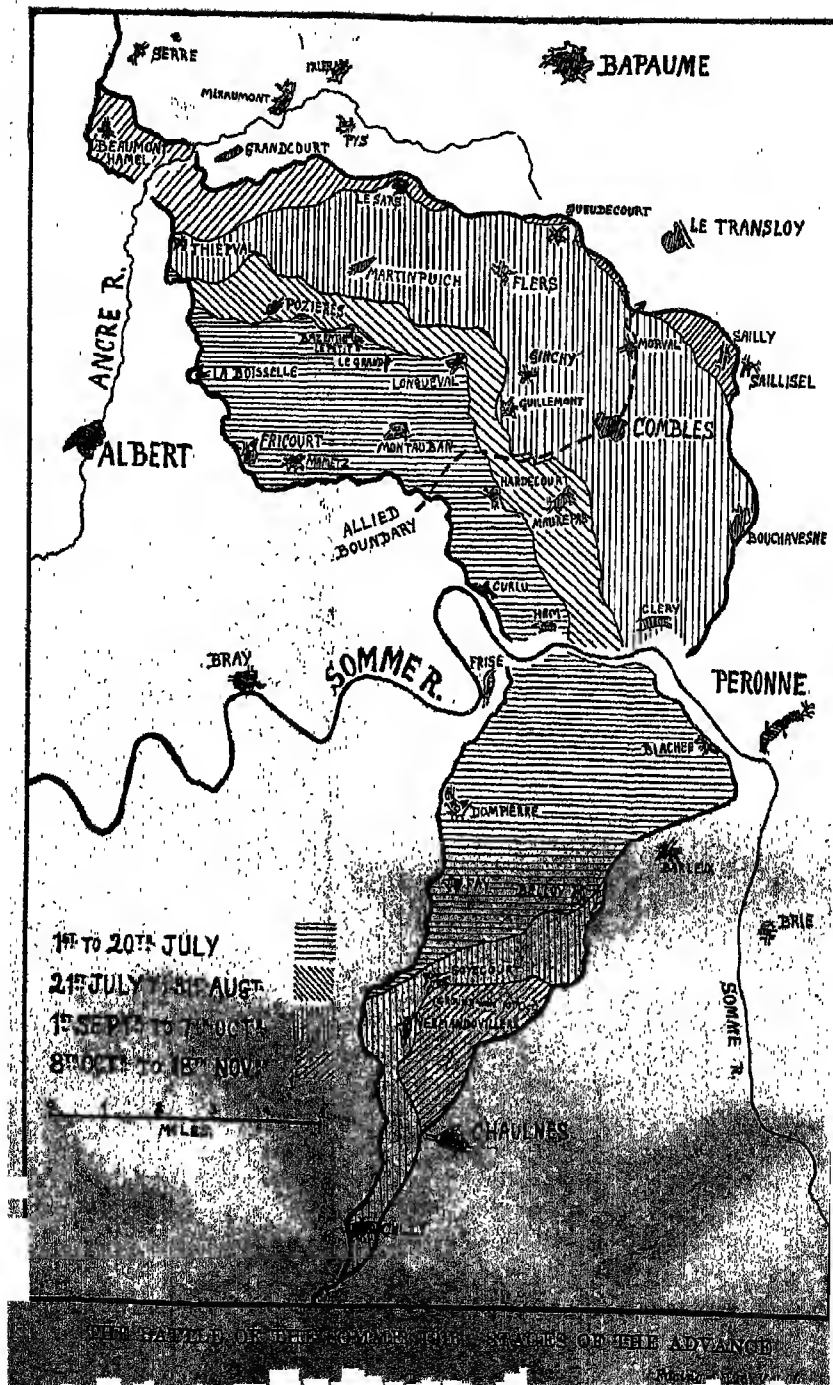
CHAPTER VI

THE SOMME, 1916. THE SECOND STROKE FOR A DECISION

(By J. H. B.)

If the ground won on the Somme in 1916 be marked on a map in such a way as to distinguish the Allied gains during the following four periods : (1) the first three weeks of July ; (2) the remainder of July and August ; (3) September and the first week in October ; and (4) the remainder of October and the first half of November, the resultant picture will give at a glance a very good idea of the general structure of the battle.

The nature and intent of the opening blows are clearly shown in a deep and rapid advance on both sides of the Somme, the effects of the surprise assault south of the river being particularly noticeable. The map itself suggests that a great effort made to drive a gap through the German defences has fallen not far short of success. Then on the French front south of the Somme the battle is seen to die away altogether until September, while north of the river the changed character of the struggle is indicated by the comparatively short distance covered in the space of some six weeks of constant fighting. Next the battle flares up suddenly anew with great violence north of the Somme, while on the extreme right the French extend the battle front to the south, seeking to pinch out the German salient formed by their July advance. It is evident that a new attempt has been made to force a decision, while the depth of ground gained on so wide a front argues that there has been a considerable accession of strength to the Allied



Armies, as well as a deterioration in the quality of the enemy's defence.

Ultimately, however, the second great thrust shares the fate of the first, and is held—though the late season of the year when this occurs may well suggest, as was indeed the fact, that the arrest of our advance in October was due far more to adverse weather and the state of the ground than to any increased powers of resistance displayed by the enemy. In the last period, the small gains shown all along the front from Saillisel to the Thiepval ridge are evidence that it was not until all hope of a large exploitation that year of our earlier successes had been defeated by the weather that the British Commander-in-Chief decided to content himself with the brilliant November operation on the Ancre.

The outlook at the beginning of September was undoubtedly much more encouraging for the Allies than it had been for some time past. It is true that the prolonging of the struggle had given the enemy time to form an estimate of our intentions and to prepare new lines of defence to meet them. All his available resources in men and guns were concentrated on the Somme front. These were disadvantages, but they were more than counterbalanced by the factors that could be set against them.

The first advantage enjoyed by the Allies was the possession of the better moral. Despite the strengthening of his garrisons and the rapid construction of new defences, the enemy had not been able to prevent our troops from working their way forward step by step to the crest of the main ridge. We had established and maintained a definite superiority, not only in the first onrush, but in all the obstinate give-and-take fighting that followed. Yet throughout this second period we had not been putting out our full strength. On the contrary, we had been husbanding it, economising both men and shells to the utmost degree compatible with our policy of exerting constant pressure on the enemy. Our attacks had been of a partial or local character with shallow objectives, putting a great strain, admirably borne, upon the battalions engaged, but setting

free a maximum number of troops for rest and training. Our casualties, which in the first four weeks of the battle averaged some 39,000 weekly, fell to an average of less than 18,000 per week during the following seven weeks to September 10.¹

Naturally the fact that our attacks were thus limited in character was not stated in the daily reports sent to the Press at home. It was our object, not only to inflict the greatest loss possible on the German troops opposed to us, but also to tie as many German divisions as possible to our front. From this latter point of view, the higher the importance attached by the enemy to our assaults, the better for our purpose. While the German *communiqués* followed the obvious course and attempted to encourage the German public by exaggerated descriptions of great British attacks bloodily repulsed, our own leaders must often have found themselves hoping that the German Higher Command really believed a half of what they published to the world. For the same reason, our own *communiqués* were a matter of much difficulty, for we had our own public to consider, and it might happen that a report admirable from the point of view of the impression it was calculated to produce upon the enemy would have the worst possible effect at home. This clash of interests was not always sufficiently allowed for either by politicians or by the Press.

To resume ; apart from economies in the field, the British forces were also strengthened by the natural increase in the home output of munitions and the flow of reinforcements. Despite our losses, the bayonet and sabre strength of the British Army in France at the end of August had been maintained at some 650,000 as compared with the 660,000 peak on July 1, while the number of British heavy guns in France had increased from 730 to 950. Then there were the tanks.

On the French side, our Allies, as had been expected, had

¹ These figures are for the whole British front in France, but they are adequate for the purpose of comparison. It should be borne in mind that the ordinary losses of trench warfare during the summer months could be expected to give average casualties of not less than 5000 per week for the five British Armies.

largely recovered from the strain of Verdun and had for some time been able to keep a considerable number of divisions out of the line, training and refitting. Some of these were now available for offensive operations, and it seemed as though the general idea of the original battle scheme, in which strong French forces were to seize the high ground covering Péronne, and, having thereby turned the line of the Somme, enable other French forces to cross the river and seize the rising ground to the east of it, might even yet be in part accomplished.

To be sure, the loss of two months of summer weather necessarily entailed some modification and curtailment of the original plan, quite apart from the fact that even now the French were not in a position to renew the offensive in anything approaching the strength with which it was first intended that they should take part in it. The British effort was still the decisive factor, though the French share would now be substantially increased. It followed that, even supposing it should prove possible to break through the enemy's freshly prepared lines of defence, a winter campaign of exploitation could not be expected to have such decisive results as one launched with the greater part of the summer still in front of it. Our aims, therefore, had to be much less ambitious than those which had seemed possible of achievement when the scheme for the Allied offensive had been first drawn up.

Given, however, five or six weeks of favourable weather, no improbable event for September and October in this part of France, a great deal might yet have been accomplished before winter set in. It was still necessary for the joint offensive to make progress east before its development to the right and left of the battle area could be undertaken to the best advantage; but the farther and the more rapidly the Allied troops succeeded in pressing east, the greater were the opportunities that lay before them. If the weather held, it was not deemed to be beyond our powers to effect such a breach in the enemy's lines as would destroy his permanent defences on a wide front, lead to the capture or

destruction of a large body of his troops, and render the retention of his positions to the north precarious in the extreme as soon as the seasons changed. Similarly, in whatever degree events should limit our progress eastwards, there would still remain a possibility, more or less advantageous according to the degree of progress actually made, of turning to good account the situation on the flanks of the Allied thrust.

On the British side, at any rate, it was felt that, if nothing else resulted, a great deal would have been gained, both morally and materially, by keeping the enemy on the move for the longest possible period. In the first place, he would thus have to contend with winter conditions in constructing his defences against our next advance. Secondly, he would be given the least possible time to recover from the physical and mental strain of the wearing-out battle before the Allied offensive was resumed in the spring.

There was, therefore, in September as in July, a series of alternative aims before the minds of the British Higher Command. In the most favourable event, there was the prospect of a victory, less crushing indeed than that which had been deemed possible earlier in the year, but none the less of great moment. In the least favourable event, there was the certainty of inflicting great and permanent damage on the moral and material resources of the enemy, and of bringing the campaign to a close for the year in a situation far more advantageous for subsequent development than that with which the British Commander-in-Chief was prepared to be well content, as an ultimate and less favourable alternative be it understood, when the battle started in July.

The first step in the development of this new phase of the offensive was necessarily the carrying forward of the eastern face of the Allied salient, and in particular the capture of that much contested locality which the map still labelled Guillemont, and of the other German defensive works in its vicinity. Hitherto the main difficulty had been that from the nature of the ground it had been practically impossible

for the British to progress until the French had got their left shoulder well forward. Now, however, that Maurepas and the southern portion of the Maurepas spur were at last firmly in French hands, the task of the British right was much simplified. The combined attack launched by the Allies on September 3 was, accordingly, successful all along this eastern front. In this assault and its subsequent developments, the Sixth French Army (13 divisions), attacking with 4 divisions in line on a front of about 8000 yards north of the Somme, registered an advance of some 3000 yards in the centre of their attack, capturing Cléry and Le Forest. The Fourth British Army, employing the 5th and 20th Divisions, a brigade of the 16th Division, and the 7th, 24th, 1st, and 15th Divisions on a front of about 12,000 yards from the Combles ravine to west of High Wood, took Falfemont Farm, Guillemont, and Ginchy, the last after seven days of most obstinate fighting at close quarters, and made useful progress at other points. The attack of the Reserve Army (4th Australian Division, 25th, 49th, and 39th Divisions, on a front of about 10,000 yards from east of Mouquet Farm to Beaumont Hamel) met even stronger resistance, but here also a number of local gains were made. More important, however, than any gains on the northern sector of the British front at this stage was the fact that the awkward salient in the Allied line had been wiped out. The preliminary operation had been successfully accomplished, and the main assault could now be launched.

Meanwhile, this combined attack north of the Somme had been closely followed by a renewal of the French offensive south of the river. The positions reached by our Allies in this area in the first half of July had resulted in the formation of a sharp salient in the German lines, extending from Belloy-en-Santerre (held by the French) to the old German line west of Vermandovillers and thence southwards to the neighbourhood of Chilly. Foch now aimed at the capture of this salient, and, that accomplished, hoped to reach the Somme at St. Christ,¹ so as to be in a position to cover the

¹ Nearly two miles south of Brie.

right of the Sixth French Army operating towards Cambrai. On September 5 the Tenth French Army (13 divisions) attacked on both flanks of the salient with 9 divisions in line, and in the course of two weeks' fighting took Chilly, Vermandovillers, Soyécourt, Déniécourt and Berny-en-Santerre, an advance of from 800 to 2000 yards on a front of about 19,000 yards. The fighting in this area then died down once more until October 10, when the remainder of the German salient was in fact reduced. The attempt to reach the Somme had not succeeded, and by the middle of October battle-fighting on this front had closed.

The main Allied operation north of the Somme took the form of two assaults delivered in rapid succession, the one by the French on September 12 and the second by the British on September 15. By this arrangement, the French attack, like that undertaken by the Tenth French Army a week earlier, would probably absorb a portion of the enemy's more readily available reserves, and so assist the weightier thrust undertaken by the British three days later. So far, therefore, as the scheme of attack was concerned, the different French and British operations were well co-ordinated, as they had been during the first portion of the battle, and remained so throughout the rest of the year. The difficult nature of the ground itself compelled the closest interaction of the attacking forces. The situation with which the Allies had to deal was of a kind to cope with which, as the despatch says, 'Unity of command is usually essential', but in this case the cordial good feeling between the Allied Armies, and the earnest desire of each to assist the other, proved equally effective and removed all difficulties.' The fact that good feeling and co-operation were not always able to ensure that the different stages of a difficult advance were accomplished at all times in precise accordance with plan was a circumstance which depended on quite other factors than the system of command.

At this time, apart from new and incomplete works already commenced some distance in rear, such as the Sail-lis-le Transloy-Thillois line, the enemy's main system

of defences on the British front consisted of three lines of trench, which for ease of description may be lettered alphabetically. The first, or 'A' line, ran from Combles to a point south of Flers, thence westward through the northern corner of High Wood, and along south of Martinpuich to its junction with the enemy's original second line north of Pozières, from which point his original defences on the Thiepval ridge were for the main part still intact.

The second, or 'B' line, branched from the 'A' line south of Flers, and thence ran round the south-west corner of that village to Eaucourt l'Abbaye, and round the south-west of Le Sars towards Pys.

The third, or 'C' line, ran from Frégicourt to the south-west face of the Morval spur; continuing thence in a north-westerly direction along to the westward of Les Bœufs and Gueudecourt, till it reached the Albert-Bapaume road at the Butte de Warlencourt. It then passed south of Warlencourt Eaucourt, whence it swung west to join the 'B' line near Pys. A network of advanced lines and communication trenches, which were being improved and added to daily, had also been dug in front of and between these three main systems.

On the French front these 'A' and 'B' lines did not exist, but the 'C' line was continued from Frégicourt in a south-westerly direction to a point south of and connected with the Combles defences, and then in a southerly direction to a point just east of Cléry. So that the prolongation of what on the British front was a third line of defence formed the first German line in front of the French. Behind this French sector of the 'C' line was another or 'D' line of trenches branching out from the 'C' line above Frégicourt, and running southwards through Rancourt and Bouchavesnes to the defences of Péronne.

The French attack on September 12, launched on a front of about 7000 yards with even more powerful artillery support than accompanied their attack of July 1, swept over the portion of the 'C' line opposed to them and, pushing on in the centre, reached and entered the 'D' line

at Bouchavesnes. In the course of the next two days the whole of Bouchavesnes was captured, and smaller gains were made on the flanks of a thrust which had already attained a maximum depth of about 3000 yards. Unfortunately, it was not found possible to exploit this rapid advance. On the 15th, when the British blow fell, the enemy had already succeeded in closing the breach in his line at Bouchavesnes and thereafter our Allies were unable to make any material progress in this direction.

The capture of Bouchavesnes was none the less a most encouraging prelude to the British operation. It was felt that big possibilities were but a short distance ahead of us, and troops had already been warned that the time had come for very bold and vigorous action. On the front of attack, besides a superiority of at least 4 to 1 in infantry, we had a more numerous artillery, practical supremacy in the air, and a large mass of cavalry immediately available to exploit to the full a successful assault by the other arms. In addition we had a new weapon of war which might well produce great moral and material effects. The enemy had suffered repeated defeats and been driven from one strong position after another. He had undergone great loss and hardships, and there had been convincing evidence that his moral had deteriorated in consequence to such an extent that many of his men were only being held to their tasks by the severity of German discipline.

Several times already great confusion and disorganisation had been seen in the enemy's ranks as the result of our successful assaults, and it was only the great depth of his defences and the consequent difficulties of a rapid advance by our troops that had enabled him to recover in time to oppose our further advance. As a result of all that had been accomplished he had now comparatively little depth or strength in the defences behind him, and his reserves were weak and composed entirely of units which had already suffered defeat.

Such were the words in which commanders and troops were urged to push home their assault with the greatest

vigour, boldness and resolution. Success was to be followed up without hesitation or delay, to the utmost limits of endurance.

The front of the British attack launched on September 15 extended in its full development for a distance of about 15,000 yards from Leuze Wood, west of Combles, to beyond Courcellette. The immediate neighbourhood of Combles was not included in either the French or the British front of attack, as the Allied scheme provided for the capture of this small town and its defences by envelopment, without direct assault upon them. The place was in fact occupied eleven days later by French and British troops in conjunction, practically without opposition.

The operation was planned to take place in successive stages, the first objectives including the enemy's 'A' line from west of Combles to the southern outskirts of Martinpuich. After this the line to be gained reached from a point midway between the southern corners of Flers and Les Bœufs, round the southern outskirts of Flers, where it cut the 'B' line, to the south-eastern corner of Martinpuich. The next step would be to push forward to the 'C' line in front of Morval, Les Bœufs, and Gueudecourt, and west of that point to take Flers and, if all had gone well, Martinpuich and Courcellette. Finally, the villages of Morval, Les Bœufs and Gueudecourt were to be taken by assault and a way opened to the country beyond.

Supposing that all this were accomplished in the course of a few days' successful fighting, rapidly enough, that is, for our advance to outstrip the industry of the enemy in constructing fresh defence lines, the favourable situation was to be exploited with all available resources of men and guns. The first efforts of the cavalry, supported by the other arms, were to be directed to following up the enemy's beaten troops, capturing his guns, and establishing a covering force well to the east of the breach in the German lines; in order to protect further operations (directed northward) against possible counter-attacks from the south-east, east, or north-east.

Under the cover so afforded, Rawlinson's Fourth Army was to operate northwards as quickly as possible against Eaucourt l'Abbaye, Le Sars, Butte de Warlencourt, and towards Bapaume. Every effort was to be made to extend the success northwards as far as possible on the first day of operations. The capture of Martinpuich, by a turning movement, was to be the signal for the Reserve Army to come in on the left of the Fourth Army, capturing Courcellette and supporting the Fourth Army in its advance.

As soon as the situation admitted, which would probably be when Courcellette, Martinpuich, and Le Sars had been captured, the Reserve Army was to operate, in touch with the Fourth Army, towards Pys and Grandcourt, taking the Thiépval defences in the flank and rear. Thereafter, the left of the Fourth Army was to be directed from Le Sars on Bois Loupart and Bihucourt, and the right of the Reserve Army on Achiet-le-Grand. If the battle developed favourably on these lines, the general intention was to continue the advance in a north-easterly direction, cutting the communications of the enemy in front of the Third and First British Armies. The enemy's garrisons on these fronts would then either be forced to surrender or would be exposed to attack in rear flank and front as they were attempting to withdraw.

It will be seen that this plan followed closely the lines of the original Allied scheme of operations, with such modifications and limitations as the course of events had imposed. The part of the French in it was not even yet entirely definite, it being still uncertain what strength they would be able to develop, and consequently how far they would be able to push their own attack or give assistance to the British. Their operation south of the Somme on September 5 and following days had not had the success that it was hoped would follow from it. The Somme had not been reached, and the presence of the enemy in strength on the left bank of the river rendered the original French scheme for operations beyond the river less likely of achievement, even though the French forces operating north of

Péronne were able to turn the river line. As has been seen, too, by September 15 the attack of these latter forces launched on September 12 had also been arrested.

Just as, in the case of the British operations against Guillemont, it had been necessary for the French left to be held well forward to assist the progress of our troops across the slopes that Maurepas commanded, so now the British right had to be thrust forward in order that the advance of the French left might not be harassed from the enemy's dominating positions on the Morval heights. The capture of Morval by the British would facilitate the French in their attack on the high ground at Saily-Saillisel and Saillisel, which had to be taken by the French before the British in their turn would be able to push on across the slopes beneath it to the assault of Le Transloy. The interaction of the French and British forces had, therefore, to be continuous in any event, whether the French were able to pursue their more extended schemes in the direction of Péronne and beyond that town, or not.

The principal episodes of the British attack on September 15 and the troops that took part in them are reported in the official despatch and need not be referred to specially here. It is sufficient to repeat that all along the line the troops of the eleven divisions taking part¹ made remarkable progress, penetrating to a depth of some 3000 yards in the Flers sector and establishing an advance on this and the days following of from 2000 to 3000 yards on a wide front. The 'A' and the 'B' lines were both overrun; but the 'C' line, covering the line of villages, Morval, Les Bœufs, and Gueudecourt, was still held by the enemy. In other words, the first two stages of the battle had been completed successfully according to plan, as well as that portion of the third stage represented by the capture of Flers, Martinpuich, and Courcellette. On the right our

¹ The 56th, 8th, Guards, 14th, 41st, New Zealand, 47th, 50th, and 15th Divisions, the 2nd Canadian Division, and a brigade of the 3rd Canadian Division in that order from right to left. The Canadian divisions belonged to the Reserve Army.

advance had been checked by the resistance of a hostile strong point known as the Quadrilateral, the strength of which consisted in the fact that it was sited on a reverse slope with a false crest-line which made it most difficult for our artillery to locate it accurately. This obstacle and the disturbance it caused in the line of our attack were chiefly responsible for our failure to secure in our first day's fighting the sector of the 'C' line mentioned above.

The success of the operation as a whole, however, did not depend on our carrying out the entire scheme at a single blow, and enough had been accomplished in this first onslaught to encourage the hope that a series of similar blows delivered in quick succession would ultimately secure for us the realisation of our full plan. The material results of the battle were already much in advance of anything we had achieved hitherto in a similar space of time. The greater experience of our troops was shown in a marked falling off of the proportions of casualties to troops engaged, while the behaviour of the enemy, though there was nothing that could be described as yet as a breakdown in moral, certainly gave evidence of a diminishing capacity to resist organised attack. The enemy still counter-attacked frequently, but in general these counter-attacks were not pressed with any degree of vigour and, though they served to hinder the regular progress of our advance, nowhere endangered the positions we had already won.

As soon as it was seen that we had reached the limit of the advantages that might be gained by exploiting locally the disorder into which the enemy had been thrown by the overwhelming of so large a segment of his defensive organisation, it was decided to have recourse to a second deliberate operation, and to prepare at once for a properly mounted attack with the necessary artillery support. Once more everything depended upon speed. Behind the 'C' line the enemy was again hard at work on new defences, endeavouring to strengthen the villages of Morval, Les Bœufs and Gueudecourt and to complete the Le Transloy line beyond them before our next assault should be launched. Accordingly,

it was decided that the Fourth Army should renew the advance on September 21, in conjunction with the French, whose operations against the Saillisel heights would be directly assisted by our attack on Morval. As soon as this blow had been delivered, the Reserve Army would move in its turn against that part of the Thiépval ridge still held by the enemy.

At this stage our arrangements were again upset by the intervention of bad weather. A great part of the enemy's defences now consisted of freshly dug trenches which did not yet exist on any map, and without weather that permitted of proper observation of fire adequate artillery preparation was impossible. Despite the obvious importance of letting our second stroke follow quickly upon the heels of the first, further operations had perforce to be postponed for four invaluable days, which the enemy employed to the utmost to strengthen his positions and re-organise his garrisons. Nevertheless, the attacks launched by the Allies on September 25 and 26 on the whole battle-front from the Somme to the Ancre won for us another deep advance. A second proof was furnished of the outstanding achievement of the battle, namely, that with our present methods of attack the enemy had become incapable of resisting our assaults or denying us progress within the ranges that our guns could cover. Provided that our attacks could be repeated without material interruption from the weather or other causes, the ultimate rupture of the enemy's prepared defences was a mathematical certainty.

The main French effort on the 25th was directed northwards on a front of some 4000 yards between the Péronne-Bapaume road and Combles. In this sector of their battle line our Allies made an advance of about 1000 yards, capturing Rancourt and, after fighting lasting throughout the night, Frégicourt.

On the same day our own troops, the 56th, 5th, 8th, Guards, 21st, 55th, New Zealand, 1st and 23rd Divisions, attacked on a front of some 15,000 yards from the neighbourhood of Combles to the neighbourhood of Courcellette.

Morval and Les Bœufs, representing an advance of some 2000 yards, were both taken, and important progress made at all points. The flank of the French advance against Sailly-Saillisel was thus secured. On the 26th Gueudecourt was captured, and on this day the Reserve Army continued the battle line to the west, attacking on a front of some 6000 yards from Courcellette to the Ancre river with the 2nd and 1st Canadian Divisions, and the 11th and 18th Divisions. On this extended battle front of 12 miles our advance in three days' fighting ranged from a depth of about half a mile to well over a mile. On the right, the third stage of our programme, represented by the capture of the 'C' line with the three villages behind it, was completed. On the left Thiepval fell, after exceptionally heavy fighting lasting all through the night of September 26-27. The remainder of the much disputed ridge thus passed into our possession. In the centre our line was carried forward a mile in the direction of Lo Sars, and, though the days lost to us by the weather had had their effect, on the whole front our position was favourable for another deliberate assault that should take us an important stage further towards the realisation of our general plan of campaign. Already during the night of September 25-26 Combles had been occupied.

The assault of the 5th, 6th, and Guards Divisions, of the XIVth Corps, on Morval and Les Bœufs was an excellent example of the great improvement effected in the co-operation of artillery and infantry in the attack. The troops moved forward close under an admirable barrage in perfect order with comparatively little loss, and carried out the tasks allotted to them strictly in accordance with their time-table. The operations of the 21st Division on September 26 against the 'C' line in front of Gueudecourt (Gird Trench) and of the 18th Division on the same day in Thiepval furnished striking instances of the value of our new weapon, the Tank.

Unfortunately, great as our successes had been, they had not been realised with sufficient speed for our advance to outdistance the enemy's capacity to construct new lines ahead of us. On the evening of the 26th, after the

capture of Gueudecourt, cavalry patrols were pushed out to the north of the village ; but they found new trenches in front of them, and it was clear that the time for the use of this arm had not yet come. On this front the enemy had had time to develop the Le Transloy line, which ran from the high ground at Saillisel through Le Transloy and thence followed the south-western face of the ridge to Bapaume, into a strong defensive system covered by effective though as yet less completely organised forward defences. In the sector south of Bapaume, the enemy still held the northern and western sections of the 'B' and 'C' lines, and these were capable of being linked together rapidly and combined into a powerful line of resistance. Our task receded before us, but as yet it had not gained upon us. Rather our troops were gradually but steadily reducing it, both as regarded the actual distance that separated them from the open country and as concerned the ascendancy they had established over the German fighting man. Another effort, made without loss of time, yet prepared with the same care and carried out with the same skill that had characterised those that had preceded it, might decide the race in our favour. While, therefore, the temporary disorganisation caused by our last assaults was again exploited locally to the utmost, preparations for a third major operation were pushed on with all speed. One thing, however, had become of essential importance to the success of our right in this next stroke, namely, that our assault upon Le Transloy and its defences should be covered by the prior, or at least simultaneous capture of the Saillisel positions by the French. Accordingly, in order to assist our Allies in their attacks on Saillies-Saillisel, arrangements were made for their left to be extended, and Morval was handed over to them.

While preparations were being made for a general Allied attack on October 5, substantial progress was made by us at many points in the course of the local operations above referred to. During the remaining days of the month, the Reserve Army pushed ahead gradually down the slopes overlooking Grandcourt and the upper Ancre valley. The

enemy's defences here were old-established, and the fighting severe. The capture of the strongholds known as Stuff and Schwaben Redoubts would indeed furnish ample matter for a story of its own. On September 27-29 two Brigades of the 55th and New Zealand Divisions captured a section of the 'C' line north-west of Gueudecourt, together with another trench linked up with it, on a total front of a mile and a half. On the last of these days, a single company of the 23rd Division took Destremont Farm, and under heavy shelling dug trenches joining the position to our line.

On October 1 a rather more extensive operation was undertaken successfully by troops of the New Zealand Division (XVth Corps) and of the 47th, 50th, and 23rd Divisions (IIIrd Corps) against Eaucourt l'Abbaye and the portions of the 'B' and 'C' lines defending the village. This attack was followed from the air by a senior officer, whose report affords interesting evidence of the excellence of our artillery practice at this period of the battle, and also of the difficulty and importance of the infantry keeping close up to the creeping barrage.

'At 3.15 P.M.,' runs the report, 'the steady bombardment changed into a most magnificent barrage. The timing of this was extremely good. Guns opened simultaneously; the effect was that of many machine guns opening fire on the same order. As seen from the air the barrage appeared to be a perfect wall of fire in which it was inconceivable that anything could live. The first troops to extend from the forming-up places appeared to be the 50th Division, who were seen to spread out from the sap-heads and forming-up trenches and advance close up under the barrage, apparently some fifty yards from it. They appeared to capture their objectives rapidly and with practically no losses while crossing the open.

'The 47th gave the impression of having some difficulty in getting into formation for attack from their forming-up places, with the result that they appeared to be very late and to be some distance behind the barrage when it lifted off the German front line at Eaucourt l'Abbaye and imme-

diately to the west of it. It was plain that there was a good chance of failure, and this actually came about, for the men had hardly advanced a couple of hundred yards when they were seen to fall and take cover among shell holes, being presumably held up by machine-gun and rifle fire. The tanks were obviously too far behind, owing to lack of covered approaches, to be able to take part in the original attack; but they were soon seen advancing on either side of the Eaucourt l'Abbaye-Flers line (i.e. the 'B' line), continuously in action and doing splendid work. They did not seem to be a target of much enemy shell fire.

'The enemy barrage appeared to open late, quite five minutes after the commencement of our barrage, and when it came it bore no resemblance to the wall of fire we were putting up. I should have described it as a heavy shelling of an area some 300 to 400 yards in depth from our original jumping-off places. Thirty minutes after zero, the first English patrols were seen entering Le Sars. They appeared to be meeting with little or no opposition.

'The most startling feature of the operations as viewed from the air was the extraordinary volume of fire of our barrage and the straight line kept by it.'

The resumption of the general offensive should have followed hard upon the heels of the capture of Eaucourt l'Abbaye, but again the weather intervened. Three days' continuous rain compelled the postponement of the operations planned for October 5 until the 7th, and once more the enemy profited by the delay. Even so, dull weather and high westerly winds hampered the work of our airmen and interfered with both the preparation and execution of the attack; while it would further appear that the enemy had gained information of our intentions, for in some instances he put down a defensive barrage shortly before the hour of our assault. In spite of these disadvantages, attacks undertaken by the Fourth Army, in support of French operations extending from Bouchavesnes to Morval, captured Le Sars, where the IIIrd Corps gained the larger part of their objectives, and made useful progress east of

Les Bœufs and Gueudecourt, where the XIVth Corps took their first objectives but were unable to make permanent progress beyond them. In this area, our advance was taken in flank from the German Saillisel positions, and our troops were greatly dependent upon the progress of our Allies. Though the French on this day made progress north of Bouchavesnes on the outskirts of St. Pierre Vaast Wood and filled up the re-entrant south-east of Morval, they did not succeed in pushing their advance as far as Sailly-Saillisel.

The results of the whole operation, though by no means inconsiderable in themselves, undoubtedly fell short of those previously obtained, and the weather, bad enough hitherto, now finally declared against us. With every day's rain, and there were few days when rain did not fall heavily and none so favourable as to effect any sensible improvement in the ground, the chance of carrying through the full scheme of our offensive drew further and further from us. Though strong pressure all along the British battle front was continued throughout October, and on October 12, 18, and 23 and on November 5, the Fourth Army again attacked in support of French assaults upon the Sailly-Saillisel positions, it daily became clearer as the stormy weather persisted that the opportunity so nearly realised by our September advances had definitely gone. The belt of trenches between us and the open country to the east and north deepened day by day, the defence now steadily gaining on the attack. Behind Le Transloy a new German defence system was appearing on the line Rocquigny-Riencourt-Bapaume, while on the British side of the fighting line the rapidly deteriorating condition of the ground was making all movement of men and guns more and more difficult. In the operations of October 12 and 18¹ above referred to, the French at last reached and took Sailly-Saillisel, but the adjoining village of Saillisel was still held by the enemy,² and in any event

¹ An obvious copying error in the despatches gives September for October.

² Saillisel was claimed by the French on November 12, but when this sector was subsequently handed over to us by the French on the extension

all hope of turning this success to account in 1916 had by this date disappeared.

For the remainder of the year therefore fighting on the southern and central portions of the battle front was confined to small operations designed to effect minor improvements in our line, and in this, whenever a slight betterment in the weather made the co-operation of artillery and infantry at all possible, our troops were successful. The capture of Regina Trench on October 21, when the IIInd Corps (4th Canadian Division, 18th, 25th, and 39th Divisions), profiting by a short period of hard weather, took 5000 yards of German trenches with over 1000 prisoners at a cost of some 1200 casualties, is a notable example of this form of fighting.

Meanwhile, since it was no longer possible to realise a more ambitious programme of exploitation, preparations had been taken in hand for a limited operation that should at least turn to advantage the favourable situation that our advance had brought into being on our left flank. The local attacks delivered at other points, as that of the XIVth Corps east of Les Bœufs and Gueudecourt on October 23 in conjunction with operations by the French,

of the British line southwards, the front trench at Saillisel was found to run through what had been the extreme western outskirts of the village. The German front line, here shown on our maps as Sullivan Trench and on the French maps as *Tranchée de Saillisel*, passed through the western half of the village, with an unnamed support trench some 200 yards behind it sited in the eastern half of the village. A great deal more than half of Saillisel, therefore, was still held firmly by the enemy when the sector was handed over to us. Sullivan Trench was captured with 70 prisoners by the 7th Battalion Yorkshire Regiment, 17th Division, on February 8, 1917. This entirely successful local operation, which gave us control of the western half of Saillisel, was reported in the British *communiqué* with characteristic discretion as the capture of an important enemy position on the highest part of Saily-Saillisel hill, thus avoiding any awkward questions as to what had happened to Saillisel since the French reported its capture in November. On the night of February 9-10 the enemy counter-attacked and was repulsed, our positions being improved somewhat on the flanks in the course of the fight. This time the British *communiqué*, while still discreetly vague, went so far as to describe the incident as an unsuccessful attack 'on our new positions at Saillisel.' The eastern half of Saillisel did not come into our hands till March 15, when the big German retreat had begun.

those of the 33rd and 17th Divisions in the same sector on October 28 and November 2 respectively, and the rather more considerable operation by the Fourth Army on November 5 in support of a French attempt to take Saillisel, served at once to improve our line for the winter and to distract attention from our intentions on the Ancre.

The success of what is known as the Ancre battle of November 13 and following days, a brilliant local operation in which over 7000 prisoners were taken and positions carried that had twice resisted our assault, and at a yet earlier date had proved too strong for our Allies, is perhaps the best indication of how closely we had come in the Somme battle to the realisation of a far more important victory. The progressive demoralisation of the German rank and file was here proved beyond question in the only fashion that is conclusive in war, the readiness with which they accepted any reasonable excuse to surrender.

In the sector south of the Ancre, the experience of October 21 was repeated and surpassed. The exploit of the 39th Division, who took 1400 prisoners at the expense of 600 casualties, was something entirely new in this war of bitter fighting. Even north of the Ancre, where the enemy, established in his original trench line, was better placed for defence and showed something of his old spirit, the same unusual phenomena were met with of large bodies of Germans giving themselves up as soon as their flanks were turned. In the 63rd Division area, one party of 300 to 400 Germans surrendered to two tanks which came to a halt on the top of the strong point they were supposed to defend. Had the same spirit been shown by the enemy on July 1, the gallant men who on that day thrust so deeply into the German defences in this sector would have held the ground they made. Had the stubbornness of July 1 been displayed by the defenders of Beaumont Hamel on November 13, the troops of the 63rd Division who pushed on so boldly to Beaucourt-sur-Ancre would never have returned to our lines.

An October like that of 1918 would have seen a very

different ending to the Somme battle of 1916. Even with the weather actually experienced, had our Allies been able to put greater weight into the battle, especially during the earlier stages of it, so that Hardecourt and Maurepas might have been gained each a little earlier, so that the main blow might have been struck perhaps on the 1st instead of September 15 and Morval and the Saily-Saillisel heights reached and won simultaneously, instead of with a gap of more than three weeks between them, it cannot be doubted that the phase of the battle scheme represented by the November operation on the Ancre might have been carried out some weeks earlier on a far more extensive scale, and with vastly greater results.

It was not only on the Ancre front that the fighting spirit of the enemy had deteriorated. An incident which took place on the IIIrd Corps front during the Fourth Army attack of October 18 is eloquent of the state to which the German infantry was reduced. Four men of the 1st South African Battalion got lost during the attack, and at daybreak next day found themselves within about thirty yards of a trench held by the enemy. Their natural anxiety was turned to gratified amazement when a party of nineteen Germans came out of the trench and surrendered to them. After the winter of 1916-1917, one has to wait till the summer of 1918 to find a parallel to such an incident. During this winter, moreover, the lowered spirit of the enemy was shown by the steady stream of deserters which, in the course of the winter fighting on the Ancre, drifted over to our lines. No mention was made of these desertions at the time, for obvious reasons. It would have been a pity to have stimulated the German command into taking the necessary steps to discourage them.

It is really no matter for surprise that at the close of the Somme battle the moral of the German Army should have been at so low an ebb. It had gone through a terrible year. Doubtless at Verdun the German losses had been heavy, though probably not so heavy as the French. There, as elsewhere, successful attack had proved less

costly than unsuccessful defence. Mangin notes that in the counter-attack by which on April 3 the 5th French Division retook the Bois de la Cuillette, the 5th Division lost less men in retaking this position than the division before them had expended in losing it.¹ It is the experience of all armies. Haig insists on it in his final Despatch, and Ludendorff confirms it in his *Memories*. 'In two months,' says Mangin, speaking of the Somme battle, 'the Germans had lost on the Somme as many men as in six months at Verdun, and had passed through the two battle-fields almost the same number of divisions, 40 on the Somme, and 43 at Verdun. The losses of the Allies were far from being as great.'² On the Somme, the Germans fought on the defensive for four and a half months, and all the time lost ground.

The British figures seem to show that these 40 German divisions represent reinforcements sent to the assistance of the 7 German divisions which on July 1 held the German line from the Amiens-Brie road to Hébuterne. So that at the end of August already 47 German divisions had been engaged by the Allies, 5 of them for a second time. By the end of the battle, the number of divisions engaged for the first time had risen to 97. Thirty-two had been re-engaged after having been withdrawn and refitted, and 4 had been put in for a third time, after a second period of rest. In all, the equivalent of 133 German divisions were engaged in the Somme 'blood-bath' in these four and a half months. The nature of the strain upon the German Army can be gathered from the fact that the total number of German divisions on the Western Front on July 1, 1916, was 121½, and in November 1916, 127.

The number of casualties suffered by the enemy is obviously a difficult matter to calculate with any great degree of accuracy during the actual course of a war; but equally obviously it is a very essential thing that the general of the attacking army should be able to form a

¹ Mangin, *Comment finit la Guerre*, p. 71.

² *Ibid.* p. 82.

working estimate of the losses he is inflicting on the defence. The problem for the Somme was rendered somewhat easier than it might otherwise have been by the fact that until the latter part of the year the enemy published casualty lists which, though much out of date when they appeared, formed some guide by which to estimate the losses commonly incurred by a German division before it was withdrawn from a fighting front. With their aid, and by comparing our own and the French practice in regard to reliefs with information obtained from German prisoners and other sources, our Intelligence Service was able to calculate with some confidence the probable number of casualties that *would be incurred by a German division before it would be withdrawn from the battle to rest and refit.* In this way, with our knowledge of the number of German divisions identified on the battle front, the progressive cost of the battle to the enemy could be worked out approximately as the fighting proceeded.

Upon the result of calculations of this kind was based the statement in the Somme despatch that the German losses in men and material in the Somme battle were considerably greater than those of the Allies. Such figures as are now available do not bear out this view, so far as the British front is concerned. The total British casualties on the Western Front between July 1 and November 19, 1916, were some 463,000. A calculation based on German returns made available since the Armistice puts the German casualties incurred opposite the British during this period at about 218,000. A reasonable allowance for casualties incurred in the course of these twenty weeks by the three British Armies on what were euphemistically termed 'quiet' fronts would bring the actual British casualties for the battle to about 410,000. Assuming German losses on these quiet fronts to be four-fifths only of the British, a similar allowance in respect of such German casualties would bring the enemy's battle casualties on the basis of the above figures down to not more than 180,000. This would mean that the German divisions engaged on the

British battle front incurred on the average between 2500 and 2600 casualties per division. This is a figure much below that at which our Intelligence Service estimated from data available at the time that a German division would be considered to be fought out and in need of rest.

It follows that the German figures above referred to cannot be taken without question to be a reliable basis of comparison. Ruling out the possibility of falsification for national or political reasons, varying methods and degrees of accuracy in the original compilation of casualty returns must always make the drawing up of comparative tables of losses a difficult and uncertain matter. Casualties so comparatively light as those indicated by the figures referred to are hardly sufficient to justify Ludendorff's gloomy picture of the state of the German Army at the close of 1916.

It is undeniable that the French casualties on the Somme were considerably lower than ours, both actually and in proportion to the number of troops engaged. To draw comparison from this fact unfavourable to the British tactics or higher direction of the battle is to forget, however, the heavier share of the fighting taken by the British, the greater experience of the French rank and file and the far more powerful artillery support enjoyed by them. This was the first really big battle the British Army had fought in this war of novel and surprising methods, and it was carried through largely by troops who had had no previous knowledge of battle fighting, and no proper period of training. If comparisons are desired, they should be made not between the relative achievements of the Allied Armies on the Somme, but between the experience and accomplishments of the British on the Somme in 1916 and of the French Armies in the 1915 offensives. Mangin says that the Somme offensive cost the French in five months appreciably less than the Champagne offensive cost them in two weeks.¹ There is the right comparison, and, judged by the French standards of 1915, the first great British offensive deserves to rank as a most remarkable military achieve-

¹ Mangin, *Comment finit la Guerre*, p. 108.

ment. There can be no question which period of fighting contributed the more effectively to the ultimate issue of the war.

In the course of this one great battle, the British citizen army drew level with the French Army in fighting efficiency and skill, rising to the full height of the increased burden that, before it was fully trained or equipped, circumstances had thrown upon its shoulders. The all-round improvement of the Army as a fighting machine is strikingly reflected in the casualty returns. In the month of July, the casualties of the Fourth Army, fighting on July 1 on a frontage of 11 divisions in 5 Corps and thereafter on a frontage of some 7 divisions grouped in 3 Corps, amounted to some 125,000 officers and men. In September, the casualties of the same Army, fighting with some 7 to 9 divisions in line grouped in 3 Corps, amounted to some 63,000 officers and men. During the whole period of the struggle, the proportion of prisoners taken to casualties incurred rose steadily, a tribute both to the greater efficiency of the rank and file and the declining moral of the enemy. In the Somme battle, the British soldier completed his apprenticeship and became a master fighter. At the same time British methods, deliberate, persistent, and sure, superseded the French system of over-haste and too great anxiety to get the war finished and France freed. The result, therefore, is as great a triumph for the genius of British military leadership as for the innate fighting qualities of the British private citizen.

As has already been insisted on, the emergence of the wearing-out battle did not exclude the possibility of developing to the utmost any favourable opportunity that might arise in the course of it for more rapid and extended action. On the contrary, the certainty that such an occasion would ultimately arise was the prime motive underlying this new conception of the struggle. The moment when the enemy's resistance would break could not be foreseen with any certainty ; but no pains were spared that might hasten its arrival, and everything possible was done to ensure that

when the opportunity came it should be seized promptly and resolutely. One of Foch's directives, quoted by Mangin with approval, expresses the general principle as follows: 'Moreover, it is always to be understood that the methodical pursuit of fixed objectives does not exclude the immediate exploitation, to the utmost extent and in any direction, of a defeat inflicted on, or even of disorganisation caused to, the enemy in the course of the operations.' Where the British view went beyond the French was in the acceptance, as an axiom of modern trench warfare, of the fact that the existence of a favourable opportunity for exploitation in one sector of the battle front did not necessarily imply that the panic or disorganisation momentarily created among the enemy's troops in that sector could be made to involve the troops in other sectors. One of the principal effects on the one hand of the huge size of modern armies and on the other hand of the extraordinary limitation of outlook and localisation of interest imposed by trench warfare, is that among troops whose general moral is not shaken panic is not readily infectious. So long as the spirit of an army as a whole is good, then despite the utter collapse of the defence in one sector the disaster can usually be kept within limits, or even turned into a trap for the attacker. It follows that before the rupture of a line of defence at one point can be turned with any certainty into the defeat of a whole army, the general moral of all ranks of all units of that army, whether on the actual front of attack or not, must previously have been undermined.

The comment passed by General Mangin on Foch's directive quoted above, itself suggests that the French command never fully appreciated this important characteristic of war as fought on the Western Front. Mangin mentions three occasions in 1915 when the German defence broke down locally before the French attack, but the French failed to profit by their opportunities, and refers to two other similar occasions when the same thing happened on the Somme.¹ He ascribes the failures to a too rigid formula

¹ Mangin, *Comment finit la Guerre*, p. 81.

of attack. A truer explanation would seem to be that it was not until the closing stages of the Somme battle, when practically the entire German Army in the west had striven vainly for weeks and months to arrest a new and relentless fashion of making war, that the moral of the German Army as a whole was reduced to a sufficiently low ebb to make possible anything more than a comparatively local exploitation of a local success. Unfortunately it was then too late in the year to profit by the enemy's exhaustion.

The British Commander-in-Chief's conviction that war can only be won by fighting did not lead him, as is shown by his refusal to make a second frontal attack on the Thiepval positions and by his constant insistence on the need for greater training and preparation, to omit or overlook anything by which the fighting might be more skilfully or more cheaply conducted. It did entail that the battle, once joined, should be persisted in relentlessly and without respite, so that the enemy might be given no time to rest his troops and recover his moral before the final blow was struck. It was consistent with this policy, even though it became obvious in October as one wet day succeeded another that the full reward of the Somme fighting could not be reaped that year, that the tension upon the enemy should not be relaxed prematurely, and that the battle should be renewed in the New Year at the earliest possible moment that weather conditions permitted. That was the course actually followed by the British. On the whole battle front, operations of a minor yet sufficiently substantial character were continued well into November, while in the Ancre sector the fighting did not die down until the third week in that month. Even then the period of quiet was of the shortest, for on February 1, little more than two months after the close of the previous battle, began the winter fighting on the Ancre which was only ended by the German retreat.

It is the more surprising, therefore, to find criticisms levelled at us from the other side of the Channel on the score that the British failed to comply with General Joffre's desire

that pressure should be continued in order to prepare for a general offensive in the spring of 1917. As will be seen hereafter, the British faithfully pursued this policy, which was their own, whereas the French, under Nivelle, turned to a different plan.¹ The last French operation on the Somme in which our Allies made any material progress was that of October 18, in which they captured Sailly-Saillisel. As has been seen, there was further fighting in this sector on October 23 and November 5, in which the Fourth British Army joined, and again on November 12, when the French claimed to have taken Saillisel. South of the Somme there were local actions at Ablaincourt and Pressoire on November 7. All this fighting, however, was of an entirely minor character, just as the fighting on the Fourth Army front during the same period was of a minor character, and for the same reason. The mud and the weather made anything else out of the question. The achievement of Gough's Army on the Ancre was all the more remarkable. Ludendorff thought it was impossible.² The French, in fact, had already retransferred their attention from the Somme and the war of attrition to Verdun, where the enemy had been forced by his overriding needs on the Somme to cut down his garrisons to a minimum. It was sound policy, leading in October and December to Nivelle's brilliant strokes at Douaumont and Caurières Wood, strokes which at comparatively light cost to the French inflicted serious loss on the enemy and raised the spirit of the French Army and nation as no success on the same scale on any other part of the front could have done. Nivelle's winter successes at Verdun were no part, however, of the war of attrition. They stood rather for the old French school of thought, from which, in the course of the Somme battle, Joffre and Foch had broken away. In them Nivelle discovered his 'recette de la Victoire' with.

¹ Cf. Louis Madelin, *Le Chemin de la Victoire*, p. 192, when he says that the mud 'more especially discouraged the English. General Haig commenced to lose hope of obtaining a result; more tenacious, Joffre and Foch continued.'

² *My War Memories, 1914-1918* (Hutchinson), vol. i. p. 290

the aid of which he sought in April 1917 to bring the war to an end at a blow.

But it was not merely by reason of the new turn given to the Allied conduct of the war, nor yet because of the example it afforded of the rapidity with which partly-trained British citizen soldiers could assimilate the latest lessons of a strange form of fighting, that the Somme was a triumph for the military genius of the British nation. A wider aspect of the British aptitude for war was furnished by the appearance of a new arm, the tank. Yet even here the voice of criticism is not silent. We are told that the tanks were used too soon; that the secret should have been kept till we had hundreds of tanks, and that the enemy might then have been overwhelmed by an attack in mass. It is not really necessary to consider whether the secret could have been kept much longer. Almost certainly it could not, for even before September 15 some inkling of the surprise in store for them had already crossed to the German side of the line. The real answer to such criticism is that of the 48 tanks employed on September 15 only about half succeeded in getting into action. The rest broke down or became ditched owing to the inexperience of the crews or defects in the machine, while of those that did come into action only a small proportion got through the day without mishap. Granted that the moral effect of the tanks was very local—that strange self-centredness of modern fighting limiting the terror they could inspire—it remains true that the policy of putting the tanks as soon as possible to the only real test of their value, that of battle, was a sound one. Only in the field could experience be gained of their use, their defects be discovered, and the best remedies devised; only by their actual employment with infantry in battle could the proper tactics of combined infantry and tank fighting be evolved. Throughout the two years and more of war following their first appearance, a constant series of improvements was effected in tank construction, and the method of their employment with other arms was continuously developed.

The experience of the Somme was as necessary to the tank victories of 1918 as the usury of the Somme was a necessary part of the final collapse of the German spirit of resistance. Here again French experience was the same as ours, though on this occasion we were first in the field. Mangin, writing of the use of French tanks in Nivelle's attack in April 1917, says: 'The infantry were not trained to manoeuvre with them (tanks), and profited little by their advance. They (the tanks) met with heavy losses; in this first experience, the heroism of their crews bought small results very dearly.'¹

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Let us turn to the results of the British battle; In his Despatch, Sir Douglas Haig claims that his three main objects had been achieved. Verdun had been relieved; the main German forces had been held on the Western Front; and the enemy's strength had been very considerably worn down. It is a claim that can scarcely be challenged. It might have been put much higher. As Ludendorff tells us, the German Armies had been brought for the first time to the very verge of collapse. When the autumn rains came to their rescue, defeat stared them in the face. Joffre, Foch, Haig, and Ludendorff are all in complete accord on this point. Higher authority could scarcely be required. On October 18, we are told, Joffre urged upon Haig the necessity of pursuing the offensive both in breadth and depth, so as not to stop at the very moment when the enemy's resistance was decreasing.² Haig wanted little urging, but October 18 was already too late. Had the French reached Sully-Saillisel a month earlier, Joffre's desires might have been realised.

Even so, Mangin continues: 'One can affirm to-day that if the pressure of the Allied Armies had been continued during the winter, the situation in the spring of 1917 would have been the same as in July 1918. . . .'³ It was not the British who relaxed their pressure. There is yet

¹ Mangin, *Comment finit la Guerre*, p. 131.

² *Ibid.* p. 105.

³ *Ibid.* p. 105.

another point of view, put forward by the same high authority in war: 'If the German attack of March 1918 had started from the line of March 1917 [*i.e.* the line held by the Germans before their retreat to the Hindenburg Line], there is no reason to suppose that it would not have obtained similar results, that is an advance of about 25 miles. That would have seen Amiens and Compiègne far overpassed, the British Army severed from the French and thrown back upon the coast, the enemy before the forts of Paris.'¹ That at least is something to the credit of the Battle of the Somme.

¹ Mangin, *Comment finit la Guerre*, p. 119.

CHAPTER VII

THE SHAM IMAGINATIVE SCHOOL IN WAR

WHAT the Somme achieved for the Allied cause and the parts played respectively by the Allied Armies have been shown in the two preceding chapters. It will not strike the public as premature to state plain facts about this battle. Tens of thousands of families throughout the Empire are deeply, personally interested in the subject. Six years after the event they are entitled to know the truth. It matters greatly to them whether the losses they endured were incurred through bad strategy or not; a point overlooked, commonly through lack of intelligence rather than through ill-nature, by the average critic of our leadership. The subject is worth touching on a little further, for misrepresentation on the subject is still rife, and nothing if not mischievous. Here we will touch on it particularly as regards the conduct of critics at the base during and after 1916.

By August 1916 our Allies were free from grave danger at Verdun on both sides of the Meuse.¹ They were able to take the initiative on the east side of the river, and force the enemy out of Vaux and Douaumont. A French Premier has told us that the German troops round Verdun then were not very good. The best German troops had to be kept on the Somme. The bitterest critics of the Battle of the Somme—and their criticism has been very bitter—have not seen their way to deny that it saved Verdun. Also, in regard to co-ordination, it was so timed that it fell in well both with the counter-offensive of the Italians on the Asiago plateau, and the stroke of the Russian Armies in

¹ Hindenburg, according to the ex-Crown Prince of Germany, gave orders to cease the attack on Verdun on September 2, 1916; but it had dwindled away before this date.

the Carpathians: though that merit in Allied warfare at this period has commonly been overlooked as undeserving of any particular notice.

But the Somme, as we now know for sure, achieved far more than this. John Masefield—about the last man who could be condemned as a supporter of senseless slaughter or of 'unimaginative strategy'—writes: 'It was the biggest battle in which our people were ever engaged, and so far it has led to bigger results than any battle of this war since the Battle of the Marne. It caused a greater falling back of the enemy armies. . . . It first gave the enemy the knowledge that he was beaten.'¹

And Mr. Masefield did not exaggerate. At the time he wrote, the Somme had grown unpopular in France, and it had found 'superior persons' or superficial critics in Great Britain who declared that British leadership had proved itself without strategic gift and merely a believer in brute force and clumsy frontal attacks.

The fact may be recalled that three or four of these political and parliamentary defamers of our leadership in the Battle of the Somme had, before the war, in public speeches, been abusing one another in the customary strain. Their charges against one another of 'buffoonery'; of preaching 'class hatred'; of being guilty of 'slovenly and unbusiness-like habits'; of possessing 'a malevolent brain'; of 'dishonouring the service of the Crown,' and so forth, were familiar to every reader of a newspaper. But there is a difference between party leaders cursing each other in comfort at home and in these same performers carping during war-time at the strategy and tactics of the Commander-in-Chief in the field. The former procedure is harmless enough, if puerile: the latter from a national point of view is infamous.

The effect of the Somme on the fighting spirit of the German troops was well known at British Headquarters

¹ *The Old Front Line* (Heinemann, 1917). A book of a true poet; imaginative, sound, reverent, it will be read long after most of the literature of the war has disappeared.

after a few months of fighting. Our Intelligence had abundant evidence of that through various sources, notably the testimony of German prisoners and military documents which fell into our hands. Evidence went on accumulating through 1916 that the German losses were heavy ; that the devastating effect of our artillery, the constant enforced retreat of the enemy, and his failure in counter-attacks were telling on moral.

But as the year advanced, and no decision was reached, this evidence grew suspect and unpopular in some quarters. The soldiers did not share in the spirit of scepticism and despondency which affected impatient and ambitious individuals at the base. There may have been a sprinkling of unsuccessful officers who utilised their leave for airing grievances and worked mischief at home. That phenomenon, however, has been common to most big wars. Wellington deplored it in 1810. He wrote, 'There is a system of croaking in the army which is highly injurious to the public service, and which I must devise some means to put an end to, or it will put an end to us.' But the pest which annoyed Wellington in the Peninsula was repeated in only a mild form in regard to the British Army in France at this or any succeeding period. The number of croakers, who carried home grievances against their leaders was, after all, insignificant. The trouble, as far as the British management of the campaign in 1916 was concerned, was mainly caused by civilian authorities. They were distressed by the notion that our fighting was not skilfully directed from G.H.Q. They held that we were relying solely on hammer-strokes, spent in vain on the impassable barrier which a skilful enemy was able to interpose between our armies in France and victory. 'The precepts and the pedantry of cold mechanic war' offended them. By and by, the casualty lists came under the censure of those who wanted a swift decision instead—and 'vision.' Of one or two among them it might be said, as of Hotspur's perfumed lord,

'but for these vile guns,
He would himself have been a soldier.'

The Prime Minister of the time did not encourage this carping spirit : Mr. Asquith, indeed, remained throughout the Battle of the Somme steadfast to our leadership. His attitude then, and throughout the campaign, was perfectly correct towards the Commander-in-Chief appointed by his own Administration. The Press at home was, almost invariably, loyal and helpful at this period. So, too, was the public. Nevertheless there was this carping spirit within the Administration. It grew assertive in the summer of 1916.

We began, as a result, to hear, for the first time in Great Britain during the war, a great deal of jabber about the lack of new ideas in our leadership, about unimaginative strategy. Now, imagination is a precious gift of humanity. Without it, what likelihood is there of success on a great scale, in peace or in war ? Art and letters must always be banal without it, science and invention unprogressive. 'We live by admiration, love, and hope,' according to a master of life ; but we might not live long as a great nation if there were not added, in those who lead and inspire us, this quality of imagination. All educated persons can be at one on that. Only, the imagination must spring out of something real, actual—as must the *imago* of the butterfly or moth. In military design and operation, it has to be based on hard fact and information : an essential forgotten by some of those who censured British leadership during the Battle of the Somme.

Hence the critics at home started at a signal disadvantage. They had never had time, if inclination, to study the elements of strategy, whilst military tactics were as the Basque language to them. Further, oddly enough, they were themselves on this occasion defective in the quality they cried out for. Impressed—correctly—by the strength of resistance possessed by the German Army, they yet failed to understand that such a power could not be destroyed, in a vast trench warfare, until it had been weakened by long and costly efforts. They imagined the immense German power—so far their imagination was well-informed, based

on actuality : but then they flinched from the irresistible conclusion that, to weaken and finally to destroy this power, we must concentrate our whole force directly against it and must pay for that concentration. They condemned that as the butcher's method—as if trench warfare against a machine like that of the German Army, acting from interior lines and sustained by the will and resources of a nation of some seventy million people, could be fought to a finish without great butchery. Γλυκὺς δ' ἀπέλροισι πόλεμος, said the Greek poet ; and sweet, truly—in imagination—even modern war can be to those critics—*imboscanti* largely—who have not studied it in the field or even in the text-book.

Some of these croakers in the late summer and autumn of 1916 increased the mischief by contrasting British leadership with French ; and by announcing that the French was the more imaginative school.

Whilst this vicious line was being worked by the unbelievers in British leadership at the Battle of the Somme, what was the attitude towards Joffre and Foch by powerful sections of the French ? The losses of the French at Verdun, the disappointment about Roumania, and the failure to reach a decision on the Somme—all combined to bring French military leadership into disfavour. Joffre was, consequently, humiliated and dismissed. Foch was humiliated and dismissed. A new Commander-in-Chief was brought in. 'No more Sommes !' became a kind of rallying cry for all who wished to win the war, somehow, without wearing down the enemy on the main front of the war ; to win it by a single, lightning stroke such as had been attempted, vainly, in 1915.

So much for the alleged want of imagination in British as compared with French leadership in the conduct of the war.¹

¹ As shown above, at least two of the French generals whom our critics found so unimaginative, and therefore so superior to British unimaginative generals, were before the end of 1916 dismissed and humiliated by our Ally. In place of one of them was put a leader whose imagination—at any rate, 'uninformed imagination'—no one has ever denied, seeing that he imagined the destruction of the German Armies within a space of 24 hours or so,

Joffre and Foch were not treated with exceptional generosity considering their services to the Allied cause ; considering the Battle of the Marne, for instance, and the admirable work which Foch had done in Flanders in October and November 1914. Yet there was more excuse for the action of the French who overthrew Joffre and Foch than for that of those British agitators in and out of the Government who were ready to weaken the authority of Haig and the faith of the British Army in him. For the French, as we have seen, had suffered heavy losses in 1914 and 1915 before we established in 1916 a large army—only tolerably munitioned—on the Western Front. These losses had been increased in 1916. The French were naturally growing most anxious about their man-power.

Moreover, they wondered, had the Germans really suffered the heavy loss in moral by the Battle of the Somme which our own Intelligence side believed ? This doubt was not quite dispelled till Ludendorff published his book in 1919. Then it was laid for ever. Ludendorff is frank about the Battle of the Somme. A cynic may say he could afford to be, as the predecessor of himself and Hindenburg was responsible for the state of things there as well as for Verdun. But, allowing for this, his Somme confessions, beyond doubt, are sincere and true. He, with Hindenburg, on taking over the command from Falkenhayn, first visited the Western Front in August 1916. He admits he had not realised the terrible situation on the Somme when he was first appointed to his new post—or *he would not have had the courage to transfer still more divisions from the Western Front to the eastern in order to keep the initiative there and to strike at Roumania.*

As to the Somme : the loss of ground did not trouble him ; rather the question was how to prevent 'the progressive

and reduced the whole thing to the exact directions of a horary ; and, less than 48 hours after he had tried to carry that idea into effect, he was condemned by his compatriots as a rash dreamer, soon afterwards dismissed, and replaced by a general who stood, above all, for caution. Thus our critics at home who yearned for imagination at this period did not get much help from the Ally.

falling off of our fighting power.' The German troops on the Somme had suffered 'to the extreme limit of endurance.' 'Not only did our moral suffer, but, in addition to fearful wastage in killed and wounded, we lost a large number of prisoners and much material.'

On September 25, 1916, 'Great were our losses.'

'The fighting had made the most extraordinary demands both on commanders and troops . . . the strain on our men was terrible.'

November 13, 1916. 'The English penetrated on both sides of the Ancre—a particularly heavy blow, for we considered such an event no longer possible, particularly in sections where our troops still held good positions.'

Close of 1916. 'We were completely exhausted on the Western Front.'¹

Speaking one afternoon early in 1920 to one who must know about the Battle of the Somme if any one does, the present writer said he had been examining at the British Museum two new catalogues devoted to the literature of the European War. There were thousands of volumes already. But he had not discovered one which gave an even passable account of what the British had done on the Western Front towards winning the war in 1916-1918.

'You must go to the Germans for that' was the soldier's comment.

And indeed to the Germans we must go for our information about the devastating effect on the German Army of the two chief British offensives of 1916 and 1917: that is, if we wish to convince honest doubters. What an irony that British leadership at the Battle of the Somme should have to wait the best part of three years for its justification: and then that this should come through the enemy.

But have those persons who in high office at home to-day condemned British leadership for its strategy and tactics in 1916 and 1917, now that Ludendorff himself has recorded

¹ Ludendorff soon perceived the tactical errors of the Germans during the Somme and made some reforms. But they were not very speedily adopted.

the straits to which it reduced the German Army, admitted their mistake? If the reply is 'yes,' then they have made amends. To own up publicly to one's errors is to play the part of a straight man. But who can give one solitary instance of such an admission by any one in high authority in this country during 1916 and 1917 who criticised the strategy of our leadership on the Somme and in Flanders? There is no such admission on public record. Ludendorff's book containing the facts as to the Somme and Flanders was translated and published in this country in 1919. It has been quoted in hundreds of papers. If the defamers of our leadership on the Western Front 1916-1918 have not read the book, they must at least have read many extracts from it. Yet they have remained mute in this matter. They have made many speeches on the war. One has waited and wondered whether they would at length play the part of straight men and withdraw their notorious condemnation of our leadership in the great offensives of 1916 and 1917. But one has waited in vain.¹ As far as the Somme is concerned, it is a case of—

'O no, we never mention it. Its name is never heard.

Our lips have now forgot to speak that once familiar word.'

The truth is they do know well what Ludendorff has admitted as to the disastrous effect of the Battle of the Somme on his army. They know also how the great Flanders offensive in the following year, besides saving the French Army, upset Ludendorff's whole campaign and brought the German soldier nearly to the breaking-point. But they remain

¹ A few months before Ludendorff's book was translated and published in this country, Mr. Lloyd George made a speech at Leeds, December 8, 1918, containing this passage: 'In the west, after colossal losses, we had failed to break through the enemy lines and actually before the attack was over Germany had withdrawn some of her divisions to the east.' The speech was obviously intended to deride our leadership in the Somme. Thus, we could hardly expect his political servants to confess that they had misjudged our military leadership in the Somme, till, at any rate, Ludendorff stated the facts in 1919. As Tyrrell reminded Sir Bingo Binks in *St. Bonan's Well*, we do not look for better behaviour in the man-servant than in the master who employs him.

unrepentant of their attitude towards our leadership on the Western Front. Is it that they still fondle the illusion that wars are to be won, even against a force such as Germany put into the field, by imaginative methods which will evade the period of great costly offensives, a *période d'usure*?

They belong, some of them, to a kind of pacific-bellicose school of war. It is a dangerous school, from two points of view. In the first place its scholars, should they again prevail at any time in the government of a nation, may be tempted by their theories to undertake war in too sanguine a temper. If campaigns on a great scale can be won speedily, and at no very heavy sacrifice of life, by brilliant experiments, by 'strokes of genius,' and if the professors of this school are ready at hand, there may be a temptation for passionate, ambitious demagogues to go to war—and call as in 1917 for 'a knock-out blow.' This danger appears slight to-day after the experiences of 1914-1918; but so it was after the experiences of the Napoleonic period, yet competing nations drifted back to war. It happens at the moment to be the popular idea that the next great war will be worse even than a great trench war of attrition in the field; in fact that it will scarcely be fought in the field but decided, swiftly, in the air and by chemistry—perhaps in twenty-four hours like Nivelle's great Aisne scheme for destroying the Germans. But, again, that idea—being a trifle too sensational to last—may pass, and we may come once more to think of war in terms of rifle and machine gun, field artillery, hand grenade, and bomb, as well as tanks, aeroplanes, battleships, and so forth. One cannot forget how in 1914-1918 all manner of long-discarded implements of war were resorted to by all the armies. Even body armour, reminiscent of the Wars of the Roses, reappeared and was warmly recommended by some of our own ingenious munitioneers. There is a story that not long after the war, some one asked the leader of the First Army Corps in 1914 whether he believed 1914-1918 arms of warfare, such as rifles, guns, and machine guns, were to-day only worth considering as relics for the War Museum. For reply, the leader went

into the hall and brought back a rough dagger—an instrument favoured by the French in 1914-1915, and, later, in their trenches. Apparently he thought it might prove a useful weapon—outside a museum—in war-time. The story is to the point when the poison gas theory is being carried to extremes.

There is, in fact, no real assurance that future war will not partake, substantially, of the character of past war, such as that of 1914-1918. And such campaigns, we are asked to believe, should be won by quick, imaginative methods. That is a temptation for the ambitious statesman, whether demagogue or despot, to enter into the great adventure lightly.

The other danger is that this extravagant school, if uppermost when a war has once started, may proceed promptly to lose it by arranging for some super-Napoleonic stroke such as that on the Aisne in April 1917, which enthralled the British Prime Minister until it was put to the test.

It is a pity one or two soldiers of note have uttered paradoxes suggesting wars are to be won inexpensively. Massenbach would have it that the supreme form of military art was war without battle: whilst Marshal de Saxe went as far as to say, 'I am convinced that a clever general can wage war his whole life without being compelled to do so' (i.e. fight an actual battle). That kind of paradox, or persiflage, encourages the superficially clever mind.

* * * * *

It is not futile to enquire, after reading Colonel Boraston's account of the 'Second Stroke' in the preceding chapter, could an actual decision through the Battle of the Somme have been reached in 1917? At least one fighting French general has insisted it could, had only the Allies gone boldly forward with the plans for strong and simultaneous action in 1917 arranged by the French and the British in December 1916 at Chantilly before Joffre was deposed. The claim surely is not unreasonable, considering Ludendorff's final admission, 'We were completely exhausted on the Western Front' (at the end of 1916).¹ Had the Allies made a greater

¹ See also page 307, vol. i. of *My War Memories, 1914-1918*: 'If the war lasted our defeat seemed inevitable.'

effort during the Battle of the Somme, the Germans might not have been able to fall back safely on the Hindenburg Line which they had been organising and fortifying anxiously from September 1916; the retreat which surprised, and embarrassed, Joffre's successor. Unfortunately, a greater effort in 1916 was not possible because the British Army was not sufficiently reinforced, and because the French economised on the Somme owing to the menace to Verdun. In saying this one is not criticising the French policy, but simply stating the facts. It was well, no doubt, to make the position at Verdun secure, even after the Germans had relaxed there owing to their own peril on the Somme. A large number of divisions were constantly put in and taken out by the French at Verdun. M. Jean de Pierrefeu, in his book *G.Q.G. Secteur I.*, tells us how 'le général Pétain, d'opposer incessamment de nouvelles troupes fraîches aux assauts de l'ennemi, allait à l'encontre des desseins du G.Q.G. Les disponibilités destinées à l'offensive future étaient peu à peu absorbées par la bataille de Verdun. D'autant que, la méthode de tourniquet, imaginée par le général Pétain, ne laissait les divisions qu'un minimum de temps sur la ligne de feu. En ne leur imposant qu'un tribut de pertes, relativement peu élevé, le général conservait intact le moral de ses troupes. Toute division qui partait à l'attaque savait qu'aussitôt après son effort, elle serait relevée. Mais ce procédé nécessitait l'entrée en jeu de très nombreuses divisions. C'est ainsi qu'au 25 mars seulement le général Pétain disposait de vingt-cinq divisions à la 2^e armée et de six divisions à la 3^e. Le chiffre de quarante divisions françaises, prévues initialement pour l'offensive de la Somme, diminuait de jour en jour. Ce grignotage allait s'accroître par la suite.'

The author praises this method. He argues that, had it not been insisted on the Germans would in the end have broken through at Verdun, and he instances the desperate attempt they made to do so even in July 1916, after the fighting on the Somme had been going on for a fortnight. But the Third French Bureau, we are told, took another

view. It complained that Pétain's policy at Verdun was spoiling the Allied prospects for the approaching offensive on the Somme. Had 30 French divisions instead of 10 been employed on the Somme, a decisive break-through, so it argued, might have been accomplished—and, then, what would Verdun, lost or held, have mattered?

Thus there were two conflicting French military views in this matter. The one attached greater importance to the defence of Verdun, the other to the offensive on the Somme : and the former prevailed.

But what of the British? Could we not have achieved a good deal more, even with our limited munitions, had our forces at the Western Front been increased, and a greater concentration been put at the disposal of our leader? On and off throughout the Battle of the Somme, we were carrying on much desultory and expensive fighting on southern fronts and in Asiatic theatres—with small enough result. We experienced attrition in our exciting adventures on those lesser theatres; and, considering the condition of the German Army as Ludendorff and Hindenburg found it even before the end of the summer of 1916, a proportion of our men sent south would have made a difference had they been allotted instead to the imperative front in France.

No doubt many of the men employed in the minor theatres during the summer and autumn of 1916 were not fitted for the rigorous work on the Somme. But others were. Besides, large numbers sent south-east at this time were at any rate fitted for the work done later by pioneer battalions in France—a point often overlooked. Through 1916 and 1917 we were compelled to turn fighting men on to all manner of work behind the lines : for example, during the preparations for the Battle of Arras in 1917. This denied our soldiers sufficient rest even after a hard spell of fighting at the front or of defensive duties in the line. It interfered gravely, too, with training arrangements. Conditions gradually improved in the year of victory. As an illustration : after the German offensive in the spring of 1918, one commander, whose fighting corps was for the time being non-

existent, was employed in directing a body of fifty thousand labourers of various nationalities who were constructing new lines of defence from Flexicourt to Bousigny.¹ Work like that would have told greatly in 1916, or early in 1917. It would have substantially enlarged our fighting forces, and speeded up preparations.

We could not evade the middle and wearing-down period of the war, but owing to the change of plans and leaders made in December 1916 the Allied strategy mainly miscarried in the first half of 1917; whilst in the second half the French effort fell away.

There was a temptation, in surveying the war on the Western Front, to join one or other of two exaggerative schools. The first, oppressed all through by the power and long preparation of the German Army, would have it we could not reasonably hope to overcome the enemy till far into the fourth year of war; and was inclined to think we only succeeded then thanks to a growing revolutionary spirit in Germany itself. The second, always harping on what it regards as the stupidity, haphazard blows and muddle generally of everything attempted in the west by the Allies till midday March 26, 1918, at Doullens—and by the scientific co-ordination, not to mention the genius, of everything accomplished by those same Allies thereafter—would have it that we might have won long before 1918 or even before 1916 by some inspired strategic stroke. These were, respectively, the gloomy and the glowing schools; the one suggesting fatalism, the other fantasy. Neither was an inviting school to attend. The first may have been the better furnished in horse-sense, but its state of pupillage was often horribly lowering whilst the issue of the struggle remained in doubt. Fortunately for the British Army in France, it got no encouragement from the Commander-in-Chief.

The second, with its flibberty-gibbet proclivities and its spasmodic outbursts of amateur strategy and tactics, was

¹ Known as the Torres Vedras line. It ran round Vignacourt, Beaulieu (Advanced G.H.Q. during the first Battle of the Somme), Anthic, Hauteville, Haute-Avesnes. Work on this line started on March 23, 1918.

a peril at times ; notably, in the early autumn of 1916, and towards the close of 1917, as well as in the opening months of 1918. It was perilous because encouraged by authority at home ; and it might have lost us the war but for these two blessings—the steadfastness of our troops at the front and the good ‘bullion stuff’ of the great mass of the people at home, or what is described in one of the despatches as ‘the character of the British nation.’

CHAPTER VIII

THE PROBLEM OF THE LINE¹

VIRTUALLY nothing was printed and next to nothing known to the public in this country during the period 1916-1918 about the discussion between French and British as to the holding of the line. Nor is much known to-day about it. Yet this was a most important controversy. Through military tact on both sides, it was not unfriendly, though at times it threatened to become rather acute when the civil power intervened. Unless at an early stage we have a fair knowledge of the question, we miss, in a matter of first-rate importance, the French view about the war on the Western Front. Far more was thought, uttered, and printed on the question in France than here, from 1916 onwards; for the French considered it vital. There were times when they viewed it as particularly urgent; and then a large section of French people, notably those engaging in politics, were annoyed with their own Government and their G.Q.G. for not insisting that the British troops should take over a far larger share of this burden of defence. Joffre particularly was angrily called to account in the matter.

References to the line, and to the requests that the British should take over more of it, and thus relieve French soldiers for work on the land, etc., have been already noticed. Joffre often asked Haig to take over more line. He was at times as urgent in this matter as on the need for the British to make a series of preliminary or wearing-

¹ A chart at the end of this volume will be found useful as illustrating the comparative strength of the German Armies on the Western Front in 1917.

down attacks on the enemy before the Allied Armies were ready for the great summer offensive of 1916. And behind Joffre was always a powerful French public opinion in this controversy.

The question did not pass in 1916 after the change in the French High Command. Nivelle, the new leader, resumed the discussion at once. Many severe criticisms have been directed against Nivelle, and one must admit that much of the censure passed by French opinion on his operations in April 1917 was reasonable. But there is this to be said for his pressure on the British to take over more line—he did fully intend that, in the great offensive of 1917, his own army should play the heroic part. The French Army was to attack on a longer front than the British—who were to play a useful, subsidiary part. It was the French Army which was to execute on a generous scale the plans that were swiftly to sweep the Germans out of France and Belgium and end the war. But suppose the stroke was not to succeed, and at the close the British were to take up the chief offensive themselves, in Flanders—would Nivelle, in that case, relieve our troops in certain portions of the line? Unfortunately, when it came to this question, the Generalissimo grew vague. He was disinclined to consider such a contingency; for he and his Staff regarded it as highly improbable. As we shall find, they were confident of a complete success till the French operations were actually started in April 1917. In any case the writer believes British soldiers in authority at the time will agree that Nivelle's pressure over the line was, considering his large offensive scheme, more excusable than that of various French leaders, civilian and military, at other seasons.

After Nivelle's humiliation and withdrawal, the question of the line was still to the fore. Thus on June 26, 1917, the demand was pressed that the British Army—if it was not to submit to the *amalgame*—should take over far more line and relieve the French troops in defence. Now at this period the French Army might fairly be described

as in a state of, well—æstivation. It had been settled at the beginning of May, after the abandonment of the stroke on the Aisne, that the British should resume the chief duties of the offensive, whilst Pétain restored the moral of his men. Therefore the British had turned off from the Arias area attack to Flanders, and in June the Second Army under General Plumer had carried out the offensive at Messines and Wytschaete. It was necessary to carry out that operation, as Colonel Boraston will show later, before starting the far greater attack northwards in the Ypres area. At the close of June, the British were mounting their forthcoming offensive. This was well known in France. Everybody in the Ypres district witnessed the huge preparations. Well one remembers motoring through the country west of Ypres at the time and marvelling at the mighty staging of that battle! Clearly, the British Army was about to enter on the vastest military undertaking in history.

Of all times this would seem the least suited for the British to take over more line for the purely defensive rôle. Yet so strong and so genuine was the feeling in France that the line ought to be divided evenly between the two Allies that La Commission de l'Armée adopted and pressed on the French Government, at this very time, the following resolutions :—

1. ' A prendre pour base exclusive de ses négociations le principe de la répartition équitable des effectifs.
2. ' À les engager de suite de façon à ce que l'extension du front anglais soit réalisée avant l'automne pour que nous puissions rendre à la terre, pour les semailles, les bras qui nous manquent.
3. ' La Commission ne considère pas que le fait d'être engagée pour les Anglais et pour les Français, dans certaines opérations, puisse empêcher les négociations de s'engager et d'aboutir à des promesses précises pour des dates ultérieures à ces opérations.
4. ' Elle attire à nouveau l'attention du Gouvernement sur la redoutable situation morale de l'armée

française et sur les risques que courent la République et la Patrie.'

Before the close of 1917, although the British Commander-in-Chief had his hands full with the prolonged offensive in Flanders followed by the stroke at Cambrai, the controversy over the line was resumed. It continued very nearly till the Germans struck in March 1918.

The French were anxious that we should take over the line even as far as Berry-au-Bac. French politicians became very insistent—M. Clémenceau even threatening to resign unless the British agreed to a considerable extension.

In one instance it was actually settled between British statesmen and French statesmen and soldiers, in Sir Douglas Haig's absence, that his forces should take over more line. That was an inexcusable decision, which was only deferred on his intimating that, if it were insisted on, he would ask to be relieved of his command.

Then the Supreme War Council at Versailles took up the question, and played with it. Pressed by Foch and others, they decided we should extend our line to the river Ailette.¹ Fortunately for the Allied cause, that wrong-headed proposal was not carried out. It had been indulged in at a time when the Germans were mounting their offensive against our armies and when our divisions were below establishment through the British Government withholding troops or sending them to a subsidiary theatre of war in the south-east. It was indefinitely postponed; and by the end of January 1918 we had, fortunately, not extended our line beyond Barisis.

What are the facts as to the division of the line between French and British forces in those years 1916-1918? Was the French contention correct that, taking into account the number of fighting effectives, the French were throughout guarding a longer line than the British?

¹ How can we reconcile this attitude about the line with the claim that the Versailles Council accurately forecast the German offensive of March? If the British authorities at Versailles had really foreseen where the blow was to fall, the proposal to extend the British line to the Ailette would have been criminal folly.

In reply to this :—

(a) The French contention that they were manning more line than the British throughout the period—indeed throughout the war—was correct: though a large proportion of the front they held was inactive in the later stages of the war.

But (b) If Haig, Robertson, and the British Government had agreed to the requests of Joffre, Nivelle, and Pétain¹ on this question of the line, the result would have been failure in the end for both French and British.

First as to (a).

Various calculations and tables were produced to illustrate the much lighter burden of line borne by the British than by the French. M. Abel Ferry, the French soldier and Deputy, has already been mentioned as a frank and fearless exponent of the French standpoint. Fortunately his reports on the question of the French effectives as compared with the British and others have been published. In 1917 he went ardently into the matter. Some of the figures should be quoted. Probably they are quite disputable as statistics: perfectly correct figures dealing with the effectives, casualties, etc., on the great war fronts have never been easy to arrive at. Roughly, however, they undoubtedly show that, throughout, the French in these years held the greater part of the Allied line. So much must be freely conceded. The Alsace-Lorraine front could be safely held by both sides with comparatively light forces.

M. Abel Ferry and his school, in pressing that the British should take over more line, admitted we had special difficulties, being an expeditionary force from overseas and needing at our base in France a larger number of non-combatants. Also, they conceded that we had immense responsibilities owing to the extent of the British Empire; additionally, that we had a far larger Navy than the French to man; commerce from America, etc., to guard;

¹ The last named was, however, most reasonable, as we shall find, after the conference at Versailles in January 1918, when it was decided to extend the British line even south of Barisia.

whilst a considerable force had to be retained within the United Kingdom in case of invasion. They did not overlook the case of Ireland, where we were compelled to keep a large force; and they drew marked attention to the fact that not only had we exempted Ireland from the law of military service, but that our exemptions in Great Britain were in 1917 still large—which they were.

Making, however, these allowances they still insisted we were not applying our full man-power to the fighting side of the war, and that we were taking nothing like our proper share of line defence in France. Their argument as to the latter contention was based, for instance, on the following table:—

1915 Hommes.		1916 Hommes.	
Janv.	$\frac{264,000 \text{ h.}}{40 \text{ km.}} = 6,600.$	Janv.	$\frac{1,118,600 \text{ h.}}{96 \text{ km.}} = 11,652.$
Avr.	$\frac{384,000 \text{ h.}}{44 \text{ km.}} = 8,750.$	Avr.	$\frac{1,116,000 \text{ h.}^1}{138 \text{ km.}} = 9,536.$
Juil.	$\frac{560,000 \text{ h.}}{63 \text{ km.}} = 8,888.$	Juil.	$\frac{1,462,000 \text{ h.}}{130 \text{ km.}} = 11,246.$
Oct.	$\frac{910,000 \text{ h.}}{116 \text{ km.}} = 7,844.$	Oct.	$\frac{1,699,000 \text{ h.}}{127 \text{ km.}} = 13,377.$
1917 Hommes.			
Janv.	$\frac{1,705,000 \text{ h.}}{131 \text{ km.}} = 13,015.$	Avr.	$\frac{1,823,000 \text{ h.}}{138 \text{ km.}} = 13,210.$

Taking the latest of these dates, M. Ferry calculated that, whereas the British with an army of 1,823,000 had about

¹ These figures are obviously wrong. Possibly M. Jules Ferry's 1,116,000 should read 1,316,000.

13 men at and behind the front for each metre of line, the French had only 5 men to a metre. The first were defending 138 kilometres of line, the second 574 kilometres of line.¹

Side by side with figures bearing on the line and on the employment of man-power by the two nations were often set forth the casualty lists of France and of Great Britain. We find, for instance, M. Ferry stating the French total losses (killed, prisoners, and missing) on December 31, 1916, at 1,294,000; the British at 343,000 on the same date.

It is not necessary to examine here how far such figures were accurate. They are quoted in order to show the French standpoint in 1916 and 1917. Many French people felt that the war was bleeding their nation white, and there was profound uneasiness as to what would be their condition if the war continued much longer. They held there was a grave danger their army might become too small to be effective when the time came to arrange the peace terms: and they did not hesitate to say so.

In regard to the fact that a larger number of troops were massed behind the British lines than behind the French, it seems to have been overlooked by our Ally that the British, except in one spot, had no ground that could be lost without irremediable disaster to the Allied cause. Only in the devastated area of the Somme battlefield in 1917 and 1918 could we lose any considerable area without running a grave risk of losing the war. We shall consider this—a fact of the first importance—when we reach the Versailles attempt to start a general reserve and draw half a dozen or more divisions from the British front. The British Commander-in-Chief was faced all through with this menace,

¹ A very weak feature of such calculations was that they quite overlooked the hard fact that the Germans had a way of massing their assault troops particularly opposite the British front. The quality of the fighting man should have been remembered as well as the quantity. Moreover, those who really believe that the French could hold a hard-fighting front with less troops than the British should study the figures in Chapter VIII. Vol. II., as to the British and French fronts in the Kemmel sector during April and May 1918. They are very eloquent in this matter.

as was his predecessor. He was ultimately forced in 1918 to give up that Somme area ; and, if he had allowed the soldiers and civilians of Versailles to remove some six or seven divisions from his attenuated line, the Allied cause in France would inevitably have been lost.

Thinning out the British forces in France and Flanders in 1917 and 1918, and taking over a still larger extension of line, must have proved disastrous : not to us only, but equally to the French nation. This consideration was curiously overlooked by our friendly but insistent Ally.

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Moreover, surely there was another strong, convincing argument against helping in the way we were so often asked to do. It was not an argument which could be well advanced whilst the war lasted. But we know now that Haig and British military opinion—both at home and at the front—were absolutely right in keeping the Expeditionary Force through these years as far as possible in a solid form.

The point is this : if we had obliged our Ally by thinning out our troops, extending our front to Berry-au-Bac, we should have failed our Ally. First, we should have failed the French in 1917 when their own offensive broke down in April and their army threatened to go to pieces. We should not in the summer and far into the autumn of that year—the most perilous period to the Allied cause during the war—have been able to strike a series of tremendous blows against the German Army which, as its leader admits, reeled beneath them—and never really recovered from the shock. Instead, having frittered away our aid to the French in a well-meant but short-sighted policy of sharing more and more defensive line with them, the most we should have been fit for would have been local attacks here and there—*grignotage*, nibbling, or whatever it was styled ; or ‘waiting for America.’ The Germans, then, would have been left free to hurl their forces on the French at their own good time.

Assume, however, that we had stretched and thinned

out our line as our Allies desired, and yet the Germans had for some reason refrained from striking France a deadly blow in 1917; what would have happened in 1918?

As it was, on March 21, 1918, after we had taken over a fresh stretch of French line—in a crude state of defence—from the Omignon river to Barisis, we had only about three rifles to a metre when Ludendorff struck at the Third and Fifth Armies—authentic figures, by the way, which do not exactly match some of those quoted in this chapter. Conceive our line by March 21 thinned out still further, extended to Berry-au-Bac. Is there much reason to suppose that, in such a case, by March 30 or April 5 the worst of the German attack would have been over, and a new line of defence stabilised? What would the prospects have been of 'covering Paris,' of saving Amiens, and of preserving intact the union between the two Allied Armies? Through the sacrifice of a great part of the Fifth Army, and the somewhat better resources of the Third Army, and through the blow which the First Army was able to strike Von Below's forces on March 28 at Arras, we were just able to hold on till the British reserves came to the rescue and the French slowly gathered and stiffened on our right. It was, however, a very 'near thing';¹ and it needs a lively imagination indeed to visualise such an escape from the German thrust had our line at that time extended far beyond Barisis—even as far as the Ailette, to which the Supreme War Council at Versailles declared it should extend.

As a fact the French in March 1918 seemed to experience quite enough difficulty in reinforcing the battle on their

¹ Fortunately, the Germans had in March 1918 no cavalry force to exploit their great success and to secure the break-through and absolute decision at the close of that month which they hoped for. This point has escaped the attention of 'imaginative' critics who deride the use of the horse in war and the old world strategy of 'cavalry generals.' But it did not escape the notice of the British Commander-in-Chief, as a few remarks of his in a public speech in 1921 show. Two or three strong German cavalry corps during the last week of March 1918 would have made all the difference to Ludendorff.

immediate left. Would they have found it easier if their left had been many miles farther east and their reinforcing divisions had been compelled to cross the communication of some half a dozen British divisions? But, it may be argued, they could, in such a contingency, have relieved our right divisions so that they could come to the battle front: i.e. two steps instead of one at a time when speed of action alone could stave off disaster. Is it not likelier that these British divisions would have had the same fate as the 58th British Division, which was cut off from the rest of our army and kept tied down to its old front for days despite all efforts of the British leader to obtain its release?

Is it conceivable that had Haig arranged with Pétain to take over this addition to his line in February or March, the authorities at home would have added to his divisions? Well, remembering the War Cabinet's opinion that we had always been over-insured on the Western Front, one cannot build much on that supposition!

Most soldiers who have studied this question will ridicule such a supposition. The figures as to the extra divisions needed for such an extension must have been put to the British civilian authorities as they were put to the French military leaders. Surely then, if the former were ready to find the troops requisite for the extension to the Ailette—to say nothing of Berry-au-Bac—they would have stated their willingness to supply those troops and would have taken steps to do so in January and February 1918. But they did not.

Decidedly, no Englishman or Frenchman with a sense of humour will care at this time of day to enlarge much on the blessings for the Allied cause which would have ensued had Haig and Robertson and our Army Commanders in France lent themselves in 1916 onward to the repeated requests that the British should take over more and more line.

* * * * *

At last, in August 1918, the time came for the British

to strike the blow which was to break the German Army. Haig was able to do that largely because he could strike with massed strength at the central point of the enemy's resistance. Had his force been spun out and attenuated, the blow would have been far less effective. A glance at the map¹ giving the disposition of the German divisions on, for instance, September 25, 1918, shows how necessary it was that the greater portion of the British Army as a massed whole should then front the enemy forces where they were thickest and where they occupied positions of the greatest strength and most studied preparation. We succeeded certainly because our troops were in great fighting form and because the series of battles from August 8 were thought out with high skill by their leaders. But it is far from certain that we could, even so, have struck home in 1918 at all had our Army been dissipated over a longer line.

Through the latter part of 1916, throughout 1917, and till far into 1918, critics, French and British alike, declared there was no real amalgamation between the two Allied Armies on the Western Front. They yearned to see these armies equally sharing in line the work of defence as if they were a single army of the same methods, race and fighting characteristics! And there was a considerable opinion, notably in 1917, which wished even to see them 'spatch-cocked'—as General Buller would have said—into each other. It was often well meant. It was natural enough. But it would have led to friction and disunity; and in the end, by the weakening of our line, we should probably have failed our Ally. Our leadership, as events proved, showed sound judgment throughout in resisting that unscientific policy.

As it was, sandwiching in French divisions with British, though it had to be adopted now and then, was not a signal success; indeed; the contrary, more than once.

Before leaving this troublesome subject—which cannot be shirked if we wish fairly to understand the British and the French points of view—there are two items that ought

¹ Facing page 313, Vol. II.

to be mentioned. One is that, though the French held a greater length of defensive front than we with our smaller army and in 1917-1918 our greater burden of offence could hold with safety to the Allied cause, they had a greater proportion of their troops in reserve and on relief than had we on the Western Front. The other item is that in March 1918, the French, after the great German thrust at the Third and Fifth British Armies, were to take over the front as far as the river Somme. Yet actually their left never got farther north than Hangard, and scarcely as far as that till nearly the end of the battle. When on August 8, 1918, we attacked the Germans near Amiens we again extended our line south of the Roye road ; and it was not until the whole Allied line shortened as it moved east that the British front began to shorten. In the spring of 1918 in the north the Belgians helped us a little in this matter.

CHAPTER IX

THE WINTER FIGHTING ON THE ANCRE

(By J. H. B.)

ONE day the story of the winter fighting astride the Ancre in January and February of 1917 will be told in detail by some writer with all available material at his disposal. What is now regarded merely as a very minor episode in a great war will then be recognised and studied as a classic example of the correct application of tactical manoeuvre to the battle of position.

A fine record of service during the first years of the war, leading to a rapid advancement from brigade to division and from division to corps, had marked out Sir Hubert Gough as the obvious commander of the reserve group of divisions which, when Sir Douglas Haig decided to press on in the southern area of the Somme attack, became with General Rawlinson's two northern corps the Reserve Army, and subsequently was known as the Fifth Army. The long series of patient operations against the Thiépval ridge, crowned by the capture of that formidable position on September 26 and on November 13 by the storming of the no less powerful defences of Beaumont Hamel, had amply justified the selection of this young but brilliant general. In the progressive actions which in January and February 1917 forced the Germans out of the northern salient created by our advance on the Somme and compelled them to hasten their withdrawal to the Hindenburg positions before they were fully ready to go back, General Gough showed a mastery of tactical manoeuvre, and of the skilled use of ground and artillery in support of infantry attack, which, it is submitted with respect, would establish his right, had he no other claim, to rank among the most able of the many competent

generals that the war brought into positions of high command.

It has been seen that the plan of campaign for 1917 as forecast by Joffre contemplated a resumption of joint offensive operations on the Somme front at the earliest possible moment, with the double purpose of hindering the recovery of the German Army from the moral, physical and material exhaustion induced by the Somme battle, and preventing any enemy counter-move which might anticipate and derange the coming Allied offensive, as the German stroke at Verdun had forestalled and modified the Allied plans for the previous year. In this way it was hoped that both north and south of the Somme thrust the unfavourable situation of the German troops in line might be turned to the best account. The obvious drawback to the opening of the major offensive in the west as early as February, which was the month most favoured by the French, lay in the fact that for climatic reasons it was quite impossible for the Italians or Russians to commence their operations till much later in the year. The important Allied principle of simultaneity of attack on all fronts would therefore be sacrificed if the French plan prevailed without modification. There was a further consideration, namely, whether even if desirable it was in fact possible to launch the main offensive with so short a time for reorganisation and preparation. This latter argument affected the British more particularly, for our effort on the Somme had been the greater and the more prolonged, both actually and in relation to the size of our army; while we had not yet succeeded in gaining full control of the railways serving our own front. It was not till the winter of 1916-1917 that this essential change was effected. The reorganisation of our entire railway system, entailing a vast amount of new construction, had therefore to be carried on simultaneously with the preparations for our next big battle.

For these reasons, it was natural that both on general and special grounds Sir Douglas Haig should have sought to postpone the reopening of the main offensive till somewhat

later in the spring. His proposals did not entail such quiescence on the Allied front in the west as would give the enemy time to pull himself together after the Somme, but merely that the big Franco-British effort should be made at a time when both armies would be fully ready for it, and it could be supported by approximately simultaneous offensives in other theatres. However, French anxiety lest the Germans should once more seize the initiative and upset the Allied plans was so great that Joffre clung to his idea of a February offensive till the change in the French Command took the responsibility from his hands. The change was an unfortunate one, for Joffre's plan presented features which, it can now be seen, were far more in conformity with the real facts of the situation than the plan that succeeded it. In the first place, Joffre had a better appreciation of the fighting qualities of the British Army, and of the capacity of its generals, and was prepared to give them a big if not a leading share in the 1917 campaign. For this reason, he did not make such insistent or such extensive demands for the British to take over more line as were subsequently made by Nivelle. Secondly, Joffre had shown himself to be a convert to the wearing-out battle. The offensive once begun, he shared Haig's view that the Allies should persist in it till the breaking-point of the German resistance had been reached. If this course were followed, the initial vice of starting the offensive in the west before the Italians and Russians could assist us would in great measure be cured automatically.

The logic of facts so far took matters out of the hands of the French that in the events which happened they were themselves compelled by purely physical causes—that is, their inability to get ready in time—to postpone their main offensive till April; thereby justifying Sir Douglas Haig, who was ready before them. This postponement until some date early in April was quite independent of the German Retreat, the very possibility of which Nivelle refused to believe in till it had actually begun.

Joffre's plan, in contrast to Nivelle's, could and undoubt-

edly would have been adapted to meet circumstances as they arose. The essential thing was to give the enemy no rest. Joffre was most insistent about this, and his wishes could have been met, as it will be seen that they were met so far as the British were concerned, by a resumption of active operations against the shoulders of the Somme advance immediately weather conditions permitted. This first phase of the campaign would have been followed up without a sensible break by a resumption in force, as the season advanced, of the main Allied offensive in the west ; which would be supported, as in 1916, by simultaneous Allied onslaughts in the Italian and Russian theatres. *In this way, the difficulty of making sure of the initiative in France while waiting till conditions on the Russian and Italian fronts made active operations possible there would have been overcome.* The preliminary assaults upon the flanks of the Somme advance could have been begun in February or earlier by both French and British, and would have been the prelude to a joint principal offensive to be persisted in conjointly with Allied efforts in other theatres, until the German powers of resistance finally gave way.

In the actual execution of this plan, itself representing the applied lessons of the experience of 1916, the operations of the Fifth Army astride the Ancre stand for the British share in its first phase. On the British front no time was lost, and changes in the French Command and policy which might, and in fact did, lead to the adoption of an entirely different scheme were not allowed to postpone or interrupt the methodical carrying out by us of what would have been our part in its preliminary stages. On the other hand, the French broke away from the policy represented by the wearing-out battle, reverting once more—for a last disastrous time—to their old idea that the war might be ended by a single stroke, sudden and victorious. They sacrificed to their enthusiasm for this ill-fated notion not only the principle of simultaneity of Allied effort in the different theatres of war, but the preliminary exploitation of the German salient south of the Somme battlefield as well. In contrast

with this action by the French, the British, despite the drain on their resources imposed by the decision to extend their line to the south in relief of their Allies, went doggedly ahead with the obvious work that lay ready to their hands. They were rewarded, and the German Retreat, when it came, only served to emphasise the correctness of their views and action.

* * * * *

To follow accurately the methods of this interesting battle and the closely related stages of its development would demand constant reference to large-scale contoured maps and diagrams which cannot be included in a review of this kind.¹ As the official despatch describing this fighting says, 'the configuration of the ground in the neighbourhood of the Ancre valley was such that every fresh advance would enfilade the enemy's positions and automatically open up to the observation of our troops some new part of his defences. Arrangements could therefore be made for systematic and deliberate attacks to be delivered on selected positions, to gain further observation for ourselves and deprive the enemy of that advantage. By these means the enemy's defences would be continually outflanked, and we should be enabled to direct our massed artillery fire with such accuracy against his trenches and communications as to make his positions in the Ancre valley exceedingly costly to maintain.' The determining factor in the fighting was the skilful use of concentrated artillery fire, requiring much foresight and good judgment in the selection of the sectors of the German line to be successively attacked, as well as in the grouping and location of our guns. The improved artillery resources of our Army doubtless helped to make such methods possible, but the credit for their successful application and for the admirable use made of the advantages of position gained at the end of 1916 belongs to the Commander of the Fifth Army and his Staff.

The November Battle of the Ancre had opened out to us

¹ The 1 : 40,000 layered map (No. 1) issued with Dent's edition of Haig's Despatches gives a very fair idea of the nature of the ground.

the stretch of the main Ancre valley which runs north-east from Hamel to Miraumont, but on both banks of the stream a succession of spurs and valleys afforded covered positions for the defence. These, however, could be opened up in turn and enfiladed by pushing forward now on the left bank and now on the right bank as occasion required, the progress made on the one bank materially aiding in each case further advances on the other. The northern slopes of the Thiépval ridge being more gradual than the southern, possession of the higher ground did not always give complete command of the German positions below us, but the positions won on this bank of the Ancre at the end of 1916 already gave us useful observation over the slopes and valleys on the right bank. The first step, therefore, was to use this observation to assist in the capture of the spur governing Beaumont Hamel from the north-east, the crest of which at the end of 1916 was still firmly held by the enemy.

Not even during the remaining weeks of 1916 was there quiet on this front, though the appalling condition of the battle ground and the difficulties to be overcome in moving guns and material prevented anything more than affairs of outposts. Even in the November attack, the assault of the 3rd and 31st Divisions across the higher ground north of Beaumont Hamel had been defeated by the deep mud which, for some reason doubtless connected with the nature of the soil, was worse on the spur itself than on the ground below it. Just as in October on the Le Transloy front Misty and Hazy Trenches testified to the difficulties our troops encountered there, so here on the Beaumont Hamel spur Muck Trench spoke eloquently of the prevailing condition of the ground. Muck Trench would undoubtedly have been taken earlier than it was but for the fact that when our troops first reached the locality where the map represented it to be, they failed to find anything that could be recognised as a trench. Bad in November, the ground grew worse as the winter advanced, a winter that was to prove the most severe experienced in France for many years. Not even in Flanders were troops

called upon to face more terrible conditions. Men out on patrol or engaged in some minor attack upon a German post found themselves suddenly caught in a clinging morass from which too often they could not withdraw themselves. Not a few were drowned before help could be brought, some were rescued by very gallant men who crawled forwards under fire on duckboards pushed in front of them as they went over the treacherous ground, until they reached their slowly sinking comrade and, having thrust a duckboard on either side of him, managed to drag him out. Others, some of them wounded, lay out there through the night in places no living man might reach, dying by inches in the freezing mud and calling on their comrades to shoot and make an end.

That in such conditions the fury of the fighting died down for some few weeks, till the gripping frost for a time made movement easier, was a thing not to be wondered at. More astonishing is it to find that even in December posts were pushed forward here and there, and January was still young when the real advance began.

The first step was to gain the remainder of the Beaumont Hamel spur—we already held the toe of it—and so open out the whole of the valley south of the Serre hill. In point of fact the enemy opened the game on the night of January 1-2 by rushing a post of 10 men due north of Beaumont Hamel, from which we already looked inconveniently into the head of the valley below Serre. It was decided that the post should be retaken on the night of January 5-6, and careful arrangements skilfully carried out not merely succeeding in re-establishing this post, but also captured a second post 150 yards to the north-west. We had scored heavily in the first exchange, for apart from gaining two posts instead of one we took 56 prisoners at a cost of 8 wounded, and in addition successfully repulsed a counter-attack on the new post. On the 7th the enemy tried again to recover his lost post, unsuccessfully.

Three nights later Gough made another move. The unsavoury locality known as Muck Trench was captured with

some 140 prisoners, and this time was held. Our advantage was quickly followed up, and at dawn on the 11th the 91st Infantry Brigade, 7th Division, attacked with the 22nd Manchesters, 1st South Staffordshires, and 21st Manchesters, and carried the rest of the German defences on the high ground, consisting of some 1500 yards or more of line known as Munich Trench, with a total of over 200 prisoners. For several days and nights the locality had been very heavily bombarded, and at three minutes before zero an intensive bombardment was opened on a line 100 yards in front of a tape-line on which our assault troops had been formed up. This barrage moved forward at the rate of 50 yards in five minutes, followed by our troops who had to find their way over ground so wet and water-logged that this rate of advance was none too slow for them. In the early afternoon the weight of artillery used to support this advance effectively crushed an attempt at a counter-attack, and the whole of the crest of the Beaumont Hamel spur passed into our possession. The despatch calls special attention to the lightness of our casualties in these operations, and attributes this in great measure to the close and skilful co-operation of artillery and infantry, and to the excellence of our artillery preparation and barrages made possible by the good observation afforded by our possession of the high ground on the opposite bank of the Ancre.

The clearing of the Serre valley and the capture of the open western slopes of the next spur, that which faced Grandcourt on the north bank of the river, was now a comparatively easy task; for the whole of this ground could be searched effectively by observed artillery fire. On the 7th the enemy was shelled out of a line of posts north of Beaucourt covering the sunken road leading to Puisieux-au-Mont, and the position occupied by our troops, despite heavy hostile shelling which caused a number of casualties during the work of consolidation and showed that the German artillery was not disposed to yield the game without a fight. During the remainder of the month our line was

pushed by the same methods steadily forward east and north across the valley, the enemy for the most part being forced to evacuate his positions by our artillery fire before our infantry attacked, though once our troops were in he made a number of attempts to recover his lost posts by surprise assaults.

Our advantageous position on the left bank of the Ancre having been used successfully to drive the enemy off the Beaumont Hamel spur and carry our line across the lower part of the valley east of it, it became the turn of our troops on this right bank to help forward their comrades on the opposite side of the river. Grandcourt was already uncomfortably overlooked from our positions on the Thiepval ridge, and although, even on ground sloping against the defence, trenches can usually be sited to afford some protection from attack from the higher ground in front, if the attacker can also gain possession of higher ground in rear or in flank the situation of the defenders becomes hopeless. This would be the fate of the German garrison in Grandcourt as soon as our troops gained a substantial footing on the spur lying to the north of the village across the Ancre. Accordingly, on the night of February 3-4, the 189th Brigade, 63rd Division, supported by artillery fire observed and controlled from the high ground held by us on both banks of the Ancre, attacked the sector of the old German second line system which ran from the right bank of the Ancre opposite Grandcourt up the slopes of the spur dominating the village from the north, and then still northwards along the western face of the high ground. Hood Battalion, attacking on the right, got clean through and its left swung round down the hillside on to a sunken road, finishing up in a position facing south from which they had to be brought back to their objectives by the battalion commander in person. On the left, Hawke Battalion, operating farther up the spur, had more difficulty, but after some two days of obstinate fighting our objectives, consisting of about three-quarters of a mile of double trench line, were gained in their entirety,

with another 176 prisoners. Our infantry were loud in their praises of our gunners, a most desirable state of affairs not always realised, and although the enemy offered stubborn resistance and counter-attacked frequently, our dominating artillery fire once more kept down our casualties.

While this attack was in progress on the northern bank, our troops to the south had done what they could to provide the enemy opposite them with employment, the 2nd Division taking 51 prisoners in a raid opposite Pys, and the 18th Division raiding the German line south-east of Grandcourt. The operation completed, its effect on the German defence at Grandcourt was immediate. On the morning of February 6 a thousand yards of German trench covering Grandcourt from the south were occupied by us without opposition and our patrols pushed forward into the defences of the village itself. By the 7th we were in full possession of the whole position, and, freed from all danger from the south, on the night of the 7th-8th the 190th Brigade, 63rd Division, pushed eastwards along the north bank of the Ancre to Baillescourt Farm, which the H.A.C. captured with 87 prisoners. We had now turned the corner of the spur north of Grandcourt, and were opening up Miraumont from the west.

From the neighbourhood of Courcelette a long spur runs northwards towards Miraumont, but instead of sloping gradually down to the river valley, the ground at the northern end of the spur rises again and forms a rounded hill or knoll (Hill 130) protecting Miraumont from the south and limiting our observation over that part of the valley. The capture of this knoll was the obvious next step in our progress south of the Ancre. Our advance on the northern bank to Baillescourt Farm had already made the operation easier by enabling us to see farther round the shoulder of the knoll, and the capture of the remainder of the spur north of the farm would still further assist our troops on the southern bank. The situation was one in which simultaneous attacks on both banks of the Ancre would mutually aid one another, and a combined operation

of this kind was accordingly decided on. Before it could be carried out, however, there was a great deal of preparatory work to be done, in the organisation of the ground already won and the getting forward of guns and ammunition. It is hard to convey a proper idea of the difficulties of this work to those who have not seen the battlefield under battle conditions. Words can give no adequate picture; but the speed and success with which it was accomplished despite all obstacles form one of the outstanding features of this fighting.

The time so employed was not wasted. The enemy still held a considerable part of the upper reaches of the valley below Serre, and though his position there was uncomfortable, our own advance to Baillescourt Farm had left us with a long and somewhat shallow flank stretching westwards across the valley to the Beaumont Hamel spur. An advance northwards up the valley would greatly improve our own position and carry a stage further the menace to the German garrison in Serre. On the night of February 10-11 the 11th Bn. Border Regiment, the 2nd Bn. K.O.Y.L.I., and a company of the 16th Bn. Northumberland Fusiliers, all of the 97th Brigade, 32nd Division, effected the desired improvement, capturing three-quarters of a mile of German trench line known as Ten Tree Alley with over 200 prisoners at a cost of some 150 casualties. A part of the German defence line consisted of a road which on the side from which the British were attacking was cut into rising ground and protected from the south by the bank so formed. On the opposite side of the road there was no bank, and the position accordingly lay open to the north. At one point our troops made the mistake of trying to consolidate the same line that the enemy had held, and, being practically without protection from his fire, failed to establish themselves. Elsewhere all our objectives were gained, and after local fighting lasting for some days, the enemy was turned out of the two posts he had regained on the line of the road. On the night following the 32nd Division's attack, the 63rd Division had pushed farther northwards along the Puisieux

road, and by the operations of the two divisions the necessary depth was given to our positions in this sector. The enemy fully realised the threat constituted by our continued advance to his positions on Serre Hill and counter-attacked repeatedly, but again without success.

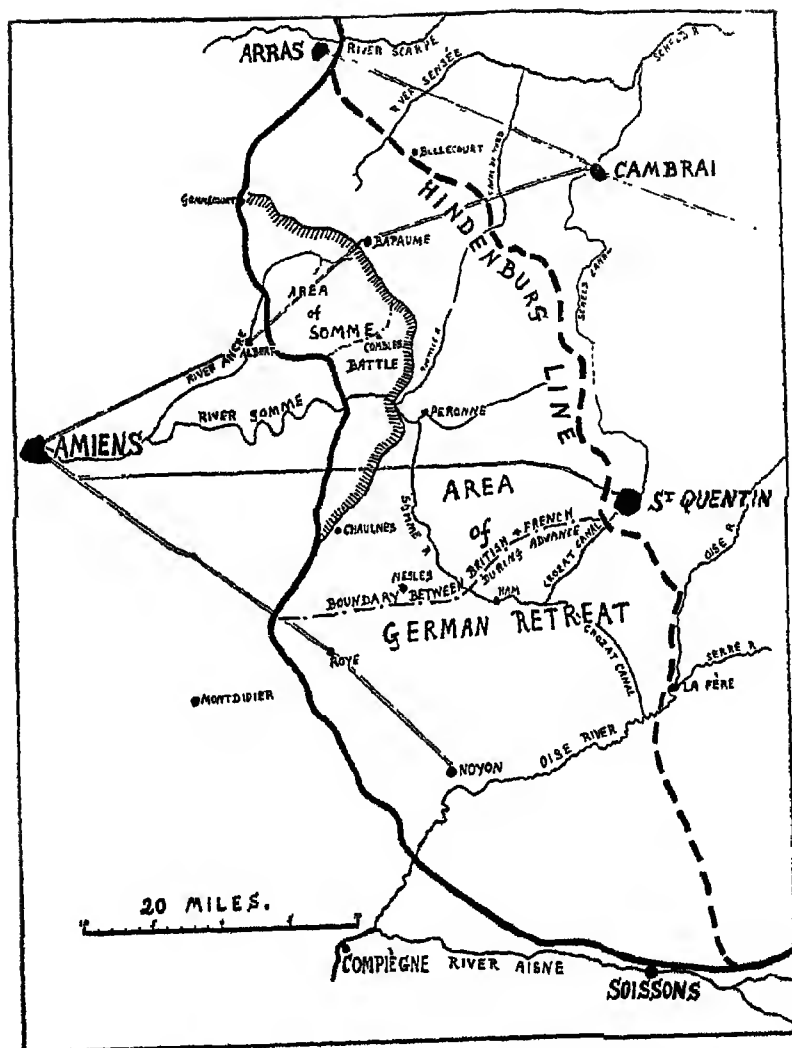
Meanwhile, our preparations for the somewhat larger operation against Miraumont had been completed, and on the early morning of February 17 troops of the 2nd, 18th, and 63rd Divisions attacked on a front of about two and a half miles astride the Ancr , from the neighbourhood of the more easterly of the two roads connecting Courcellette with Miraumont to a point about 1000 yards north along the road leading from Baillescourt Farm to Puisieux-au-Mont. On the extreme right the 2nd South Staffordshires were detailed to capture a German trench known as Desire Support, the possession of which would help to secure the flank of the main attack of the 2nd Division, carried out by the 99th Brigade with the 23rd Royal Fusiliers and the 1st K.R.R.C. A company of the 22nd Royal Fusiliers was directed to form a defensive flank on the right in touch with the South Staffordshires, and other troops of the 22nd Royal Fusiliers were to continue the attack to further objectives on the outskirts of Petit Miraumont, after our first and second objectives, including the crest of Hill 130, had been gained. The line of attack on the 18th Division front was continued by the 6th Northhamptons and 11th Royal Fusiliers of the 54th Brigade, and the 6th Berkshires and 8th Norfolks of the 53rd Brigade. North of the Ancr  the 63rd Division attacked with Howe Battalion and the 1st Royal Marines, one and a half companies of the 2nd Royal Marines being detailed to form a defensive flank on the left, facing roughly north across the spur. Two companies of Anson Battalion and Hood Battalion were in support.

In this operation our troops, though substantially successful in that their efforts produced the desired results, did not everywhere gain their prescribed objectives; the events of the day illustrating in a marked fashion the extreme difficulty of the infantry fighting in this area, the value of

18th Division. His hold on the hill had clearly become precarious.

The success of the 63rd Division north of the Ancre was complete, the same factors that helped the 18th Division assisting them also. The German artillery was held in check by our guns and the hostile barrage was correspondingly weak. Howe Battalion appears to have taken its objectives without much trouble, and the only serious difficulty, a purely temporary one, arose from the fact that the marines, who were advancing over ground with a pronounced southwards slope, edged unconsciously downhill, so that the whole battalion finished up in the southern half of their objective. This was put right by pushing up due north along the sunken road leading to Puisieux, two German strong points being taken in the process with a number of prisoners. In this way, the whole of our objectives north of the river were secured, and posts established in advance of them.

The whole operation can fairly be claimed as a success, though on this occasion our 773 prisoners were counter-balanced by rather more than 2000 casualties. Though we did not gain all our objectives on the right, we achieved our purpose, which was to render Miraumont untenable and open out the valley behind the village. Preparations for a further attack on Hill 130 were undertaken for the 22nd February, but the continuing thaw and steady rain made postponement inevitable. Before conditions improved sufficiently to permit of a set attack, our troops, who had been directed meanwhile to make every yard of ground they could and had pushed forward to within 30 yards of the enemy's posts, found on the morning of February 24 that the enemy had abandoned his positions during the night. On the same morning patrols of the 18th Division reported that the enemy had evacuated his lines in front of Miraumont. An immediate advance was ordered, and by 10 A.M. our troops were moving forward through thick mist which made it impossible to see more than 100 yards ahead.



THE RETREAT TO THE HINDENBURG LINE, SPRING 1917

Facing p. 109, Vol. I.

This retirement, the first considerable withdrawal that the enemy had made since the Marne, was the direct outcome of the masterly series of stage-by-stage advances carried out by the IInd and Vth Corps under Gough's direction and control, and, more immediately, of the battle of February 17. It is idle to urge that the Germans were contemplating retreat on a still greater scale in any event. That is admitted; but they contemplated retreat in their own time, that is to say as late as was consistent with avoiding becoming involved in a major battle. Instead, they were compelled to commence the withdrawal in Gough's time, that is to say early enough to give the British Army the longest possible period, before real campaigning weather recommenced, in which to reorganise the abandoned territory and stage their contemplated offensive on new ground. Apart from the obvious interest the enemy had to delay his retirement as long as possible, ample proof that this was in fact his intention is afforded by the obstinacy of his resistance up to this date, and by the vigour and frequency with which he launched his counter-attacks to recover the positions from which, step by step, our skilfully co-ordinated artillery and infantry action drove him.

The imperative necessity of this first withdrawal which he now made becomes clear at a glance if reference is made to a contoured map of the area. With the eastern slopes of the spur opposite Grandcourt in our possession, as well as practically the whole of the rising ground south of the village, Miraumont became nothing better than a shell-trap. Miraumont in our hands gave us control of the curving valley which runs from that village north-east towards Achiet-le-Petit and then north-west towards Puisieux. The German positions at Serre became the point of an acute salient, in hourly danger of isolation. The evacuation of Serre, therefore, one of the strongest positions on the old German front, was a logical consequence of the German failure to safeguard Miraumont, and with Serre gone the whole of the feature which Serre dominates

would have to follow, including therewith Puisieux-au-Mont.

This is in fact what happened. On February 24 the German withdrawal became general on the entire southern face of the salient marked by the villages of Pys and Serre. Next day the area of evacuation spread eastwards and northwards, until by the afternoon of February 26 it extended over practically the whole front of the Fifth Army from the neighbourhood of Gueudecourt to Gommecourt. The enemy, in fact, had fallen back to the powerful defence system known on our maps as the Le Transloy-Loupart line, covering Le Transloy, Bapaume, Loupart Wood, Achiet-le-Petit, and Bucquoy. *Le Barque* and the *Thilloys*, *Irles* and *Gommecourt* were still held by him as advance positions in front of this main line. The first step in the Great Retreat had been taken, but it had been taken under compulsion. Here in the north the area to be abandoned before the Hindenburg system was reached was at its shallowest. From Beaumont Hamel to Quéant is some 15 miles; from the Roye road at Andéchy to the Oise at Vendeuil is some 30 miles. The natural course would have been to commence the withdrawal in the area where the greatest distance had to be covered by the retreating German troops, and the driving in of the German lines in the north could not fail to react unfavourably upon the situation of German forces on the southern front where the depth of the retreat was so much greater. It will be seen that the general withdrawal began when the Fifth British Army was everywhere within 10 miles of the main Hindenburg positions.

The fact that the Great Retreat was undertaken before the date intended is further indicated by the fact that the devastation of the area abandoned was not everywhere complete, and that it was, generally speaking, less complete where the depth of retreat was greatest. Doubtless, the differences in the nature of the destruction wrought in different districts was due to some extent to differences in the character of individual German commanders; but that fact in itself proves the hurrying forward of the date of

the retreat, for had the withdrawal been carried out in their own time, the native thoroughness of the German Command would doubtless have shown itself in tours of inspection which would have ensured their directions being carried out with equal completeness in all parts of the abandoned territory.

Certainly for some time after February 26 the Germans gave every sign of wishing to postpone withdrawal. Gommecourt was now a salient more pronounced than Serre had been and could not seriously be defended. The village was occupied by the 31st and 46th¹ Divisions during the night of February 27-28, but the main line of defence upon which the enemy was now standing ran east of Gommecourt, and this main line was not to be gained without a serious struggle. So strong, indeed, was the German position in the Le Transloy-Loupart line and so decided was the opposition encountered by our troops as they drew nearer to this powerful trench system that the Fifth Army Commander, whose front it will doubtless have been observed had been very considerably increased as the result of the southward extension of the British line, decided to continue the tactics that had proved so successful hitherto. Accordingly, arrangements were made for the capture of the German positions by a series of minor operations conducted by different divisions, but directed to the same general object; each operation being so planned that it would have a direct effect upon and would simplify the next attack. These different operations were aimed in the first place at gaining the forward positions still held by the enemy in front of this main system, and in particular at the capture of Irles and the advanced positions east of it by the 18th and 2nd Divisions, and of certain trench lines at and to the west of Le Barque by the 2nd Australian Division. When these preliminary stages had successively been carried out, the next step would be a combined attack by the three divisions men-

¹ The 46th Division was the right-hand division of the Third Army at this date, XVIIth Corps.

tioned upon the main system itself at the point where it formed a blunt salient south of Loupart Wood.

The extent of the withdrawal already made once more imposed a great deal of very strenuous and exhausting work upon the pursuing British troops, and especially upon the artillery; for, while the condition of the ground and roads used by the enemy improved steadily as he withdrew, the British were still deep in the heavily shelled battle area, and the movement and supply of guns became more difficult the farther they pushed forward. Yet very little time was lost. Le Barque had been already captured. Thillooy and Puisieux-au-Mont fell into our hands before the end of the month, and on March 2 the German trench lines west of Le Barque were taken by the Australians with over 100 prisoners. Next day the 31st Division drove the enemy out of the old German second line system east of Gommecourt despite stiff resistance, and on the night of March 5-6 the 18th Division carried out a successful minor attack preliminary to their assault on Irlès. The enemy was still counter-attacking promptly and vigorously at all points and doing all he could to delay us.

The capture of Irlès itself was a more considerable undertaking, requiring careful and thorough preparation. The village lay at the toe of one of the many spurs of the main Bapaume ridge and occupied the angle formed by two lines of trench, the one, Resurrection Trench, running due north and south along its western face, and the other, known as Gréville's Trench, running roughly east and west between the southern point of the village and Loupart Wood. Across the base of the triangle so formed stretched the German main system between Loupart Wood and Achiet-le-Petit. The whole constituted a strong outpost position to the main defensive line.

Once more the feature of the attack, which was carried out by the 2nd and 18th Divisions with complete success on the morning of March 10, was the accuracy and intensity of our barrage; artillery, trench mortars and machine guns being employed in combination with great skill and effect.

Of some 300 prisoners captured, the 2nd Division alone took over 200 at a cost of less than that number of casualties, a result attributed to the fact that our men were able to keep close up under the barrage, the assault wave being pushed forward to within about 60 yards of the line on which at zero the artillery barrage opened. Dazed by the intensity and suddenness of our artillery and trench-mortar fire, the enemy as a whole offered but small resistance, surrendering freely as soon as our men entered his positions.

This highly successful operation brought the centre of the Fifth Army into position for the second phase of the scheme of deliberate attacks by which General Gough planned to drive a gap through the formidable defence system along the forward slope of the Bapaume ridge, to which the enemy had retired. Preparations for the attack upon the Loupart line itself were commenced at once, and within a few hours of the capture of the Ires positions our guns were engaged upon the destruction of the successive belts of wire that covered the enemy's main line. On March 12 the bombardment continued, growing in force as additional guns were brought into position; but the assault timed for the morning of March 14 was never delivered. Recognising that the advance of the Fifth Army could not be stopped unless the German forces opposed to it were allowed to be drawn into a general engagement, and that further British progress might endanger other troops in sectors which sooner or later it had been determined to evacuate, the German Command decided that the general withdrawal could no longer be postponed. During the night of March 12-13 our patrols crossed the main German position and found Loupart Wood and Grévillers unoccupied. Valuable papers, including the Regimental Orders of the 2nd Guard Reserve Regiment describing the British attack on Grévillers Trench, were found left behind by the enemy, indicating that however long a general withdrawal had been contemplated, the actual retreat was commenced in haste.

* * * * *

The possibility that the enemy would seek to shorten his

line in the west and economise troops by a big withdrawal had been present to the minds of the British Higher Command from the time when they first became aware, in the previous autumn, of the elaborate defensive works being constructed by the Germans across the base of the great salient between Arras and Soissons. Convinced as they were that the Somme battle had brought the German Army to the very point of collapse, and without knowledge of the change to be effected by coming events in Russia, the idea of a big German retreat that would enable the enemy to withdraw from ten to twenty divisions from the line into reserve appeared to the British to be neither startling nor improbable. It was regarded from the first as a possibility to be reckoned with, and formed one of the arguments for including the Vimy Ridge in the scheme of our offensive for 1917. As the year progressed and close observation of the enemy's movements brought confirmation of their views, the British opinion on this point strengthened. Apart from the operations on the Ancre, numerous raids and small attacks had been carried out on the Fourth and Fifth Army fronts, designed not only to gain ground but to test the strength in which the German line was held. The German retreat to the Le Transloy-Loupard line at the end of February brought matters to a crisis. This line represented the base of the northern salient between Bapaume and Arras formed by the Somme advance, and was the natural line on which the Germans might be expected to reconstruct their front, if no more than a local withdrawal was intended by them. Was it to be a local withdrawal, or a retreat on the whole front from Arras to Soissons? That was the question that filled the thoughts of the British leaders from the latter half of February onwards, and despite French doubts British opinion was already hardening in favour of the larger movement. Watchfulness redoubled along the whole front, French as well as British. The opinion of the French local command began to come round to the British view, and on March 4 General Franchet d'Espérey, who had succeeded Foch in

command of the northern group of French armies on the appointment of Nivelle, reported that there was no room for doubt that the enemy was preparing to go back to a position some twenty kilometres farther east. He urged that there should be an immediate attack, but Nivelle still refused to believe in the possibility of a German retreat.

The abandonment of the Le Transloy-Loupart positions removed the last doubt upon the question. To be sure, another trench system, the Rocquigny-Bapaume-Ablainzevelle line, ran parallel to these positions along the crest or reverse slopes of the Bapaume ridge, but if this line could be held the Le Transloy-Loupart positions could be held too, and the evacuation of the one meant that there could be no intention to stop permanently upon the other. It was clear that a bigger movement was in full course of development, and that meant a retreat to the Hindenburg Line positions on the whole front of the greater salient.

With the occupation of Gréville and Loupart Wood, therefore, the special interest of the operations of the Fifth Army on the Ancre comes to a close. A most admirably conducted series of minor battles had produced their effect. Once the enemy had been forced to disclose his hand, the retreat and advance went forward rapidly to the accompaniment of incidents too well known to need further comment here. Twelve days after its commencement on the Fifth Army front, the enemy was back in forward positions covering the Hindenburg Line, and the Great Retreat was drawing to an end in a series of local fights. It was so much time gained to the Allies in which to adjust the schemes of their April offensives to the new situation.

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While the Great Retreat is itself the outstanding proof of the correctness of the general strategy of 1916 and of the application of that strategy on the Somme, Gough's successes on the Ancre in the opening months of 1917 are evidence of the soundness of that part of Joffre's scheme which contemplated the early resumption of aggressive action on both flanks of the Somme battlefield. It being

accepted that the decision to retreat to the Hindenburg Line was taken by the German Higher Command even before the termination of the Somme battle, Joffre's programme for the early part of 1917, modified in accordance with Haig's views as it would have been by events, was for that very reason undoubtedly the right one. Reference has already been made¹ to Mangin's view of the situation and of the proper course to pursue. The plan drawn up by Joffre at the end of November 1916 for execution in the following spring included attacks to be delivered at the beginning of February by the British between Bapaume and Vimy and by the French northern armies between the Oise and the Somme. This double assault upon the two shoulders of the 1916 battlefield was to be followed some three weeks later by an offensive by the French central group of armies between Pontavert and Reims. Though the event proved that Haig was right in holding that the organisation of a major offensive for so early a date was impossible, there was nothing to prevent the French from giving effect to the general principle of recommencing operations at the earliest possible moment in the same way as that principle was in fact given effect to by Haig and Gough. Had this been done, the German retreat would have been anticipated by six weeks and could not have been carried out without great loss. The German forces between the Oise and the Scarpe could scarcely have avoided being drawn into a serious engagement under extremely disadvantageous conditions, and the French attack east of Reims—a front not affected by the withdrawal—would have had the more chance of success when ultimately carried out. The German Army would have been denied the rest it so greatly needed, and in any event—and even if the Germans had succeeded in breaking away and withdrawing to the Hindenburg Line without becoming seriously involved—invaluable time would have been gained whereby Allied operations on other fronts must have largely benefited. Moreover, the

¹ Page 158 above.

enemy would have had much more difficulty in representing to his own troops and to the world that the Great Retreat was a proof of Hindenburg's genius, and a moral already dangerously low would have suffered correspondingly.

Among the immediate effects of the supersession of this scheme by Nivelle's more grandiose but less practicable plan were, first, that all thought of preliminary operations by the French between the Oise and the Somme was abandoned in favour of simultaneous attacks on the Somme and Aisne fronts at a later date; second, that in order to set free the maximum number of troops for this supreme blow, the British front was extended to the Roye road, a distance of some 30 miles; and third, that, as a consequence of this extension of their front, the British were expressly relieved by Nivelle from carrying out on the scale originally intended their preliminary winter operations against the German salient north of the Somme battlefield. Mangin says that, practically speaking, the new dispositions put an end to active operations on the Somme.¹ So far as the French front is concerned, this is no more than the truth; but we have seen that in the British sector, though the forces available for offensive action prior to the main attack were materially reduced, it was found possible none the less to give effect to the spirit of the original conception. Judged by the extent of the forces employed and the effect produced upon the general moral of the German Army, the operations of the Fifth Army were but a poor substitute for the joint exploitation of the Somme situation which Joffre counted upon to prevent the recuperation of the German forces, and if carried out would have led by natural stages to a resumption of the wearing-out battle under conditions which, on Ludendorff's own evidence, must have resulted in the enemy's collapse. Yet in spite of an alteration in the Allied policy which, as the event proved, played straight into the hands of the German Higher Command, the far-sighted pertinacity of the British Commander-in-Chief, and

¹ Mangin, *Comment finit la Guerre*, p. 84.

the skill with which his orders were carried out by the Commander and Staff of the Fifth Army, succeeded in averting the worst consequences that might otherwise have followed from the adoption of the new French plan of campaign. Had the British Army followed the example of the French, or had Gough been less successful in his direction of the Ancre operations, the enemy would have postponed his withdrawal till the eve of the April offensives. That clearly was the object at which he aimed, for his purpose was delay, and the opening of the preparatory bombardment, still an essential part of an offensive, would have given him his cue. The result would have been a further and considerable postponement of the main battle, and while there is no ground for thinking that the delay would have altered for the better the results of the French operations on the Aisne, it would have made the problem of the subsequent Allied operations even more difficult than it in fact proved. It is to the credit of the British in general and of Gough in particular that this crowning misfortune was avoided. The Germans were forced to show their hand a full month before the date approximately decided upon for the French attack, and our Allies were given that amount of time in which to make the necessary alterations in their plans.

CHAPTER X

THE NIVELLE TRAGEDY

WE reach the Nivelle affair. In France a considerable literature has sprung up around it, an ex-Minister for War and Premier, among others, taking an acid part in the dispute. In this country little has been written, and, as far as the public is concerned, next to nothing made known about it. Whether this neglect has been accidental or not, it has certainly been a mercy to British statesmanship. There are British and French people, civilian and military, who come with credit out of the affair; but they appear not to include any British Minister of high rank: if there is such a Minister, his light has been hidden under a bushel.

On November 18, 1916, as we have seen, the Commanders-in-Chief of the French and British Armies and the representatives of Russia, Italy, and of the lesser Allied nations met at Chantilly as in 1915, and conferred on the military plans for 1917. It was decided that the Allies should engage in an early¹ and simultaneous offensive on the various fronts, so far as climatic conditions allowed; if the offensive on the Western Front was undertaken in February 1917, the enemy would be deprived of any initiative he might be aiming at, as at Verdun a year before. Joffre produced a plan in writing before the end of November 1916 which, as we have seen, proposed that, early in February, the French should attack between the Somme and Oise rivers, and the British at the same time between Vimy and Bapaume. Three weeks later, the French Armies in the

¹ Politicians as well as soldiers in France pressed for a very early offensive. In a report in October 1916 by the Commission of the Army on munitions M. Violette declared it his conviction that it was a question of life or death for France. A second Verdun was not to be thought of.

centre would strike in Champagne. These attacks were to be on a wide front, and the breaking of the enemy's line was at once to be followed by bold exploitation. Such lessons as the Allies had learnt through the fighting on the Somme and at Verdun were to be acted upon. The need of strength and speed in the striking of the blow was emphasised, and of a powerful mass of reserves for prompt intervention at the most favourable spots in the area of the offensive was not lost sight of.

A belief in regard to the Joffre period of the war prevailing in some quarters has been that, in those benighted days, exploitation and masses of reserves for swift use when required for a decisive stroke were not thought of—the sole device of British and even French strategy being clumsy frontal attacks, unintelligent butchery, and so on. But, as shown in the chapters on the Battle of the Somme, there was never anything in that belief. Naturally, as the war developed, British and French—as well as German—generalship improved its methods in many directions. Its knowledge as to the use of old and new arms of warfare, artillery heavy and light, aeroplanes, tanks, trench mortars, etc., grew; so, too, the best manner of arranging troops both in defence and attack. 1918—with some bad exceptions—improved on 1916 and 1917 in these matters; and, had the war continued, 1919 might have improved on 1918. It is impossible to conceive of a long war, with modern arms of precision and science perpetually at work, in which such progress would not be noticeable. That, however, does not show that the leaders were blockheads in the middle of the war and brilliants at its close. People who have been cheated into the belief that the period of Joffre was the period—on the Allied side—of 'the blunderbusses of blunder-headedness' should look into the plans which sprang out of the Chantilly Conference in November 1916. They strike one as sound and progressive, with an excellent sense of unity.

However, the Allies conferred in vain. Quickly any chance we had of winning in 1917 was removed. It was

fated we should continue the struggle for two years longer. The failure to reach a decision by the Battle of the Somme brought Joffre into disfavour in France. There is no reason to suppose he lost the confidence of the French Army as a whole—he certainly did not lose that of the British Army—but a large and powerful section of the public was alienated ; and it seems that he had somewhat lost the confidence of G.Q.G.

Foch also fell into disfavour, and was removed from his command. The case against him appears to have been that he wasted lives, and a great amount of artillery, on assaults in the Battle of the Somme having too limited objectives. Certainly these assaults, as shown in preceding chapters by Colonel Boraston, had strictly limited objectives, and as a result our own operations on a much larger scale were retarded and possible opportunities for gaining a decision in the summer and autumn of 1916 were thus lost. But had Foch the facilities for bigger objectives, considering the view that the defence at Verdun was more imperative than the offence at the Somme ?

The losses at the Somme, added to the heavy losses of 1914 and 1915, told against Joffre and his methods.

Besides, G.Q.G. did not escape censure in regard to the attack by the Germans on February 21, 1916. There seems no doubt that the defences of Verdun on the right bank of the Meuse were somewhat defective. In November 1915 Colonel Driant—a French politician and Deputy but a gallant soldier, who later died fighting a rear-guard action at the beginning of the battle—was shocked by their condition in his sector and gave evidence before the Commission of the Army. The report of the Commission was laid before the French Minister of War, Galliéni, who drew Joffre's attention to the matter. Joffre replied that the whole question of the Verdun defences had been thoroughly considered, and that they were now—December 18, 1915—in a satisfactory state. He took marked exception to the complaints, and declared that they weakened his authority : he had need of the confidence of the Government, and could

not consent to retain his command if that authority was lessened. Galliéni's reply was courteous and reassuring—the Commander-in-Chief, he wrote, had the full support of himself and his colleagues. In fact Galliéni, putting aside any personal bias he may have had owing to an old controversy over the Battle of the Marne, rallied decidedly to Joffre's support at this period. His attitude was that of Briand, through whose action Joffre was on December 3, 1916, appointed Chief of all the French Armies, including that at Salonika.

The French Government wished at the time to strengthen Joffre's position perhaps partly in order to make the British Government more amenable to French plans, in the east especially.

Therefore Galliéni, like Briand, warmly supported Joffre for some time; but when the German attack on Verdun showed that the defences there had, after all, not been put in the most satisfactory state, he was shaken. Early in March 1916 he proposed a new arrangement in regard to the French Higher Command which would have reduced Joffre's powers. He did not insist, as Briand was opposed to taking any action against the military leader during the Verdun crisis; and later he became ill and retired from the Government, being succeeded by Lyautey.

But Galliéni's opposition to Joffre's leadership was mild compared with that of a large section of politicians and of the French public. They censured Joffre for the defective state of the Verdun defences, and still more severely for what they regarded as the appalling loss of French life in the Battle of the Somme. Feeling grew stronger and stronger against him in the autumn of 1916. He was allowed to form his plans for the 1917 offensive, and to collaborate therein with British military leadership; but his opponents had made up their minds that he should not conduct the campaign whether we approved of it or not.

So in December 1916 he was removed from his command in the field and made technical adviser to the French War Cabinet. By the decree of December 13, 1916: 'Le général

Joffre, commandant en chef des armées françaises, remplit auprès du gouvernement le rôle de conseiller technique en ce qui concerne la direction de la guerre.' The Briand Ministry was reconstituted, and Nivelle at this date was appointed Joffre's successor in the field.

The desire in France for some time past had been to find a gifted leader with new ideas, one who would turn away from anything in the nature of a struggle of attrition or exhaustion. Economy of man-power was preached. The public wished to deal the German Army in France a knock-out blow, without heavy expenditure of the diminishing French forces. Considering that the enemy held entrenched positions of great strength, and that the war of manœuvre had ceased more than two years before, it was not easy to see how this strategy could be worked out. Obviously, it could not be accomplished in the manner in which Tolstoy tells us the old Russian leader, Kutuzov, wished to get the Napoleonic armies out of Russia, by following mildly on their heels and attempting no costly or daring stroke; for the German Army, unlike the Napoleonic, showed at this period not the slightest intention of departing except as far as the Hindenburg Line.

But in December 1916 a way, it was believed, had been discovered by 'la jeune école de Verdun.' The Battle of the Somme had taken the German pressure off Verdun soon after midsummer, and gradually the French got the initiative there. In the latter part of July, and in August and September, they carried out various small operations about Fleury, Thiaumont, and Souville at a trifling cost. On October 24 they engaged in a more ambitious operation which won back the forts of Douaumont and Vaux, attacking with three divisions or so in the first line, with three in the second: and this led up to a further attack on December 15 on a front of some ten kilometres between the river Meuse and the Woevre which virtually deprived the Germans of the strong positions they had won between February and July. The stroke resulted, besides, in the capture of between eleven and twelve thousand prisoners.

‘Le 15 décembre, après cette victoire, le général Nivelle disait adieu en ces termes à l’armée de Verdun : “L’expérience est concluante. Notre méthode a fait ses preuves. La victoire est certaine, je vous en donne l’assurance. L’ennemi apprendra à ses dépens.”’—Painlevé in ‘Comment j’ai nommé Foch et Pétain’ (*La Revue de Paris*, 15 décembre 1921).

These attacks were thought out and delivered with exemplary skill. There was an admirable ‘unity of command,’ which should always be practicable where an army with officers and troops of the same nation, training, and temperament is concerned. Excellent touch was established between the infantry and the artillery, and the latter was so arranged that—according to French statements—the enemy’s superiority in this arm was discounted.

There was also a precise horary, which—more or less—worked out according to plan ; and speed was the order of the day.

The result aroused great enthusiasm throughout France. These bigger battles of October and December had achieved what they aimed at, with light French losses ; and Verdun was now out of serious danger. The leadership and the fighting had been done in the best French style, true élan in both. Though, to keep one’s sense of perspective, it is well to remember that the heart had passed out of the German effort at Verdun even before Ludendorff and Hindenburg took over the command at the end of August. The enemy’s final throw had failed as far back as July 11, before Fort Souville, and his divisions had been drawn off, of necessity, to the Somme.

The inspirer of these two gallant operations had been, since May 16, 1916, the commander at Verdun of the Second Army, Nivelle. A colonel of artillery at the beginning of the war, and gradually rising through merit, he now suddenly became its heroic figure. Even before the second operation at Verdun he was acclaimed as the man who would win the war ; and presently he was chosen as Commander-in-Chief over the heads of Pétain, Foch, Castelnau, Franchet

d'Espérey, and other French leaders. The meteoric rise of Nivelle to the head of the French Army is the most romantic incident in leadership on the Western Front during the war. His sudden fall was tragic. Like a forgotten English poet, he 'blazed the comet of a season'; and some of his loyal friends and supporters—he did not lack these—would not hesitate to say that, like that poet, he 'found the meanest of all sepulchres.'

The new Commander-in-Chief started with two disadvantages, irrespective of whether his scheme was sound or not. In the first place he failed to impress several of the leading French generals. Pétain had misgivings about the new strategy, and stated them firmly. There were others of authority in the field who, likewise, could not, when questioned, hide their doubts. And as the time for the offensive drew near these misgivings grew more and more marked. Blame for this has been thrown on the French Ministers in the spring of 1917; but the truth is that some of the leading generals in the Nivelle offensive came to view it askance quite apart from any ministerial prompting. Micheler and Mazol, who were to play highly important parts in the offensive, seem at most to have half-believed in it.

Secondly, his powers were not as large as Joffre's: the French Government, the civil power, had frequently been invoked to take a more active part in military management, and now, with Joffre removed, it was to intervene decidedly. Hence the new leader's powers were somewhat curtailed. He was appointed Joffre's successor in the command of the north-east group of French Armies, but at first Joffre himself by his new and vague appointment appeared to be over Nivelle and all other French leaders in the west and elsewhere, for he was not only technical adviser to the French Government—he was Commander-in-Chief over all the armies. Soon afterwards Joffre's power, it is true, was perceived to be merely nominal, but Nivelle's power, none the less, was sensibly curtailed in certain directions by the Minister for War. He was denied Joffre's supreme powers in regard to all Army appointments: they reverted to

the Minister for War. Nivelle's powers were curtailed by Lyautey's successor.

On the other hand, he started with some rare advantages. The operations at Verdun had given him a dazzling reputation for generalship. Brilliant results, speedily secured, and a light casualty list—these put him firmly in the saddle. Then he and his staff and supporters had, and expressed, a most complete faith in his great scheme. The confidence felt by Nivelle is illustrated in a note for the British War Cabinet in January 1917. 'Cette opération est-elle possible? A cette question l'Armée de Verdun, dans les journées du 24 octobre et 15 décembre et l'Armée britannique sur l'Ancre ont répondu victorieusement.¹ Nous rompons le front quand nous voudrons à condition de ne pas attaquer au point le plus fort et de faire l'opération par surprise et attaque brusquée en 24 ou 48 heures.'

He gave his military allies clearly to understand that, if we entered upon this plan, it should be with the clear intention and resolution of carrying it right through. The plan, like Strafford's, was 'Thorough.' Alternatives were not worth considering. The British Admiralty had wished to see the Belgian coast cleared by an offensive in the north. The British Government had countenanced that view. British leadership in the field perceived the advantages of this and was anxious to undertake it in 1917. With the French Armies standing in, it might well have proved a great success, a decision might have been reached through it. This is not a rash prediction, considering that, eventually, the British did strike in the north; and reached near to a decision there, despite the fact that the stroke came too late in the year and that the French—save for a few divisions under General Anthoine—stood out of the offensive altogether. But neither the Flanders nor any other possible alternative in case of his own failure appealed to Nivelle and his Staff.

¹ Singular that the first 'imaginative' French strategist should thus refer with approval to 'unimaginative' British strategy in the Battle of the Somme.

True, in a letter dated December 21, 1916, to the British Commander-in-Chief, he did not absolutely rule out the British plan for a Flanders offensive in 1917, but he thought that Flanders would be cleared by his own plan, all right. 'Si notre grande offensive réussit, il est certain que la côte belge tombera entre nos mains du fait de la retraite des armées allemandes, et sans attaque direct. Si, au contraire, nos attaques échouent, il sera toujours possible d'exécuter à la belle saison les opérations projetées en Flandres.' A remarkable concession from Nivelle: but unfortunately, as events turned out, *la belle saison* had to be deferred till far into the summer of 1917, which greatly reduced our chances of a strategic decision there.

It was obvious, however, that Nivelle and his supporters regarded all other proposals as *pour rire*: French and British alike, who know the circumstances of the extraordinary episode, seem agreed about this. The leader's Staff was at least as confident of speedy success, and as impatient of other proposals, as himself. Particularly Colonel d'Alenson, his right-hand man, drove on the plan. Certain subordinate leaders who ventured to express doubts or criticisms at an early stage in regard to the Nivelle plan were removed from their posts.

Though later, through the fall of M. Briand, this confidence was to be dashed by the French Government, it was a great help to the new leader whilst he was forming his plans in the winter of 1916-1917.¹ A man who cannot believe in failure, and whose friends are enthusiasts like himself, is on the way to success: always provided he has a feasible project.

What was the attitude of the British Army towards the new leader when his plans were first sketched out? Well, he had nothing to complain about on that side. It is true that, later, some painful differences arose, through no fault of our own. But in the early stages he received all the

¹ Painlevé records how on March 22, 1917, Nivelle spoke to him as if the plateau of Craonne was as good as in his pocket. As for the Hindenburg Retreat he told the new Minister for War that it would release more French than German divisions. He was sure of a great success.

support he could reasonably expect. We had already made with Joffre our plans for the 1917 Allied offensive, but, on the change in the French command, we adapted ourselves loyally to the new arrangement. Like Pétain and other tried French leaders, we could not throw ourselves without reserve into the enthusiastic mood of the moment—into the vogue. It has never been a secret that Haig gravely doubted whether Nivelle had really a weapon capable of the great stroke he contemplated. Painlevé is right in suggesting this. Equally he is right in regarding the British Commander-in-Chief's early attention to the Hindenburg Retreat as sagacious. Apparently M. Briand saw in this attention only a wish to thwart Nivelle's offensive—an odd delusion. One could admire Nivelle's high spirit, his patriotic intention to use the French Army for the chief part in the *coup*, without adopting his view that it could not fail.

We put aside the arrangements we were making as a result of the Chantilly Conference on November 18, and were prepared to act loyally with the new choice of the French nation and Government. The Commanders-in-Chief accordingly met at Cassel on December 20, 1916, to discuss the new plan. The rightness of this step cannot be questioned by any staunch mind. Our guiding principle was to be, whether the French military leader was Joffre, Nivelle, Pétain, or Foch, an absolute working alliance with the French Army: 'closest co-operation of the French and British as an united Army must govern the policy' of the British Commander-in-Chief, in the words of the instructions of December 28, 1915.

'Principle' is a term sometimes lightly played with by nimble minds. For instance, principles in the political profession do not necessarily mean 'firsts' to-day; though in difficulties they are often the first things to be abandoned. But, apart even from the consideration of honour, it would be disastrous for a leader in the field to take that line. Misgiving or no, we felt bound to go in with the French Commander-in-Chief and recast our plans. And this was done.

Finally, Nivelle could congratulate himself on the support he soon received from British statesmanship. Our rulers at home, depressed about the Somme and sceptical as to the soundness of our military Intelligence, were eager for something new, for some plan of operations on the Western Front which they could understand. The fighting of 1916 offended them. They wanted a swift decision instead. Nivelle soon got in touch with the British War Cabinet, and won his way to its heart. Several of the French books on the Nivelle period bear witness to the excellent impression the new leader made on our civilian authorities when he visited them and vividly explained his strategy. His enthusiasm and gift of speech were worth a great deal. Here was a soldier who could talk as well as themselves. His ability was obvious.

He did not impress the British public and Press in the same manner, because, for one thing, neither was really acquainted with the man and his methods till a long time afterwards. Even to-day, to the public, he is little more than a shadowy name, signifying failure.

What was the nature of Nivelle's plan? Some writers have represented that, after all, it conformed largely to the strategic decisions reached at the Chantilly Conference, only varying slightly from Joffre's plan. An early date for the offensive had been pressed for at Chantilly—so it was by Nivelle, who wished to start even in February 1917. Also, in both plans the attack was to be sudden, vehement, and rapid, and exploitation, etc., were desiderated. On January 29, 1917, Nivelle, in a note to Micheler, dwelt on '*le caractère de violence, de brutalité et rapidité que doit revêtir l'offensive, et en particulier son premier acte, la rupture.*' So far, no doubt, the two plans did coincide, but they seem to have had little else in common.

Nivelle's battle was to be 'decisive'¹—anything in the character of a wearing-down struggle being shunned. He

¹ His scheme was sketched in a note, dated as early as December 24, 1916, and addressed to the commanders of army groups, also in a letter on December 21, 1916, to the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army.

proposed, with the aid of the British and with the French army group of the north, to pin the enemy's forces on a large front; to effect a rupture of the German lines at another point; to conquer the opposing armies, and to exploit drastically the result of this decisive stroke. He calculated he must have a large mass of manoeuvre for the purpose on the Aisne front—three armies of 3 corps apiece, in all 27 divisions. Two of these armies would ensure the breakthrough, and between them the third army would follow immediately after the rupture, to exploit the victory. The rupture was to be achieved within 24 or, at most, 48 hours.

At the Somme the British Army had played the principal, the French Army the subsidiary part. The rôle was now to be reversed. However, Nivelle expected a great measure of support from the British. They were chiefly to attack on the Arras front, and all their available reserves were to be used there for exploitation. Also it was proposed that between Reims and Arras lesser actions should be undertaken by both French and British Armies to pin the enemy to his front whilst the breakthrough was effected by the three French armies of manoeuvre on the Aisne.

These proposals do not appear to break any particularly new ground as compared with previous offensives, or to bring in a new age of strategy. It is only when we look closer into the outlines which Nivelle, Micheler and the other generals who acted under him devised for the opening attacks and into the proposals for exploitation after the preliminary victory, that the plan is seen to differ ambitiously from preceding ones. The breakthrough and the entry of cavalry and then the army of exploitation on the scene were mapped out with an extreme precision. There was to be clockwork, and the minutes, almost the seconds, were to be allotted according to an exact plan, in which the enthusiasts for the offensive seemed to repose implicit faith. They were going to surpass in exactitude their record in the autumn at Verdun and succeed on a vast instead of on a small scale. This resolution was taken months before the actual attack, though it was elaborated during the winter and early spring.

For instance, an army corps with three divisions was to be given a certain time from zero in which to take the first German position. It was allowed, after doing so, a halt of ten minutes. Then, at zero plus an hour and ten minutes, it was to be despatched again and given another hour or so for reaching and taking the second German line. A fresh rest of ten minutes, and it would be despatched on the next objective. At the end of the first day it would have established itself firmly on a line about eight or nine kilometres from its starting-point, having taken the third enemy line.¹ A 'large order' this, remembering the experiences of two and a half years of trench warfare.

Exact preparations and a time-table are not to be made light of in war; but, unfortunately for full success in this plan for the French Armies on the Aisne front, everything depended on the time-table being worked out according to plan. On no account was the stroke to pass into the attrition stage. 'No more Sommes.' It was to be an irresistible break-through, restoring at once the war of manœuvre. The rupture of the enemy lines having been carried out by the Fifth and Sixth French Armies, exploitation on a great scale would follow. The plan, as finally evolved by Nivolle and his Staff and Army Commanders, directed the French G.A.R., G.A.N., and G.A.C. to progress north-east; the first two in the area between the river Sambre and the line Berry-au-Bac—Château Porcien and Sedan; the third to the south of this line. The first objective of the G.A.N. was to be the railways from Hirson towards Cambrai, Valenciennes, and Maubeuge. The G.A.R. and G.A.C. would aim first at the conquest of the Aisne, next at the region between the rivers Meuse, Somme and Oise.

¹ In the British attack on April 9, 1917, at the Battle of Arras, virtually the whole German front line was stormed and captured in under three-quarters of an hour. Two hours after zero—5.30 A.M.—our troops advanced against the second objective. By the end of the day we had gained a firm footing in the enemy's third line. This was a remarkable performance, but Nivelle's plan presupposed something much quicker and more exact for the Aisne battle.

As for the horary referred to above, it utterly broke down in practice on April 16, 1917, when the Battle of the Aisne started.

Meanwhile the British, their right on the Sambre, were to strike on the general line Valenciennes-Louvain. Mons, Tournai and Courtrai were to be captured.

Fighting in this decisive struggle was even visualised between the Ardennes and the southernmost point of Holland ; or at least the enemy's communications were to be endangered there, according to Micheler.

This plan, grand in its general design, and minute in its detail for the opening twenty-four hours or so, aroused high hopes in France. When it was actually started in the spring enthusiasm had spread from the leaders to the poilu ; so that the idea became prevalent among officers and men alike in the chief attacking French Armies that the end of the war was swiftly coming. ' C'est le dernier coup, nous allons en mettre,' and ' Le soir, nous devons être à Amifontaine et être relevés dans les quarante-huit heures,' were exclamations of gratitude and confidence from the troops heard by one who visited the scene of operations shortly before the attack.

There are still good soldiers in France who hold that the plan was never given a fair chance. Admitting the results aimed at were not realised within the short period the leader himself apportioned to them, they yet insist that their plan was grievously damaged beforehand by the conduct of its opponents in the French Government and the criticisms of some French generals. Others insist that the attack, once entered on, should have been boldly continued ; and that then the Allies would have achieved success, though not the lightning success Nivelle had believed in. There is something to be said for this view. We were to support it in May ; and in a later chapter the reader will find the British Prime Minister himself in the pulpit of war, preaching to the reluctant French Government with a fervour that presents him, for the time being, as a profound believer in *la guerre d'usure*.¹

¹ Indeed if Sir William Robertson or Sir Douglas Haig was Herod in this matter, Mr. Lloyd George could, on occasion, out-Herod either.

Reverting, however, to the plan as the leader and his staff originally designed it—the extremely quick, even facile rupture within twenty-four or at the utmost forty-eight hours, and the irresistible rush of exploiting armies which was instantly to follow and roll up the German forces, striking a fatal blow at their line of communication: was it unintelligent or unimaginative in Haig to doubt whether the weapon to be used was adequate to the blow? Surely, on the contrary. Our Higher Command would have failed to understand the nature of the stroke, would egregiously have failed to imagine the opposition of the enemy, had it not entertained some such doubts.

There is no intention here to represent the whole of Nivelle's plan as preposterous, however impracticable, in the circumstances, were the minute calculations as to how the German lines were to be taken one after another after ten-minute pauses, etc. The plan, indeed, discovered harsher critics on the French than on the British side, who condemned it as super-Napoleonic and so forth. But Nivelle in any case really had not the weapon for such a stroke. French public opinion, for one thing, would never have tolerated a casualty list such as we ourselves had to endure during the period August 8 to November 11, 1918, when the British Army finally broke the German resistance: in fact, French public and political opinion shrank away from the Nivelle plan after its start in April and the first casualty announcements.

Another drawback was this: Nivelle took too much on himself. He was impatient of advice or opinions outside those of his own circle of admirers and subordinates. He never tried hard to work in with the British. Perhaps this attitude was largely the fault of his Staff; but, whatever the cause, the fact remains that he made light of British pretensions—as he regarded them.

He was annoyed when we had to draw his attention to the hard fact that the Germans were retreating to the Hindenburg Line and that this might compromise the plan of the offensive. He did not believe it, and thought Haig

was trying to spoil his plans by suggesting it. That was a strange delusion in the French leader at the close of February 1917 when the retreat showed signs of becoming general on both British and French fronts.

Nivelle, for instance, would never have tolerated the suggestions which Haig made to the French Generalissimo at the end of August and the beginning of September 1918. At that time a consultation took place between the British leader and the French leader as to the strategy of the forthcoming operations. Foch's original plan was, frankly, of a limited and scrappy nature. The truth is, the idea of winning the war before the end of 1918 did not prevail then. The illusion that it did is popular—but an illusion. Foch's scheme included, principally, the freeing of several important railways, a success which, no doubt, would much have embarrassed and threatened the enemy.

But after the brilliant Battle of Bapaume had followed that of Amiens, Haig felt an enlargement of operations was most necessary. Would it not be possible so to combine the various attacks henceforth as to inflict a quick and decisive defeat on the Germans? The French plan was for the American Army to pass from its attack at St. Mihiel to an offensive against the enemy in the Briey iron-fields; the French to strike in Champagne; the British on the Cambrai—St. Quentin front; with an allied attack in Flanders to free the Belgian coast. The plan was high-spirited; a resolute fighting scheme. But this series of attacks struck the British Commander-in-Chief as too eccentric. Also, it seemed to him to lack cohesion, co-ordination. This was pointed out in correspondence to Foch. We suggested it would be better for the Americans, for instance, to strike in the direction of Mézières with their right supported on the river Meuse.

The whole offensive would then be of a converging character.

Admirably, the French Generalissimo agreed, and issued his Directive 3537 on September 3, 1918. Thus the plan, hitherto quite crude, became scientific.

Now there is a good illustration of what unity of direction in war means. There was no unity under Nivelle because, though a gallant and gifted man, he would not take advice. Nor would he patiently hear of any plan save his own. The truth is his school of war, and the civilians who followed that school, did not believe in the strategic or tactical intelligence of the leaders of the British Army. They only recognised them as chivalrous comrades. But they forgot that the British had enjoyed a great deal of hard experience in war. In small wars chiefly—yes, but the French themselves had hitherto had no experience in large wars.¹

Exactly by what arguments did Nivelle, when he visited us here early in 1917, persuade his select audience (1) That his plan was sound strategically and tactically; and (2) that the French Armies he intended to employ were fully adequate to the task? We do not know. They may be locked away in archives. The same may apply to whatever arguments on his behalf were used by the two French politicians, M. Doumerque and Admiral Lacaze, who are understood to have helped in the military education of the British War Cabinet.

Presumably such doubts at least fitted through the intellects of Nivelle's Cabinet champions here. One can only conclude they were dispersed by eloquence and talking ingenuity of a high order. It is certain that if the direct intervention of Cabinet Ministers and politicians is henceforth to be the rule in military operations, the gift of eloquence will have to be cultivated in every school of war. It will have to be part of the education of the young officer who aspires to generalship. Debating clubs and classes may have to be made a feature of every military staff in peace; and, when war breaks out, they may have more or less to take the field—as they did for a season at Versailles. A forbidding outlook, in which one foresees a

¹ There is reason for saying that certain German generals were by this time taking a different view as to the capabilities of the British officer. General von Kluck, for example, came to the conclusion in 1914 that the British officers were distinctly good.

to war not so much of victory as of babel. Gift of speech does not connote soundness of judgment or ability in action as far as war is concerned. Ruskin was not thinking of war when he wrote, 'The moment a man can really do his work he becomes speechless about it. All words become idle to him.' He was discussing art. Yet the saying would be, in many cases, particularly applicable to war. Gift of speech is in various other occupations a prime necessity. For example, what chance of success would a statesman have who could not work up his audience to a condition of loud cheers and laughter, or, on occasions, to one of infuriated protests and interruptions? It is absolutely indispensable to his training under a democratic system; though, even in the political arena, to confuse this gift or knack with depth of thought, or with genius other than genius in words, is merely to show oneself an imbecile.

As it was, babel soon became a distressing feature of this Nivelle period. For the first time in the war, the political power was really fetched to the forefront in regard to military arrangements in France. Hitherto the statesman had been not much more than a deferential visitor to G.Q.G. or to G.H.Q.; an inquirer; an observer; with an occasional seat as near the stage as prudence would allow. The Nivelle affair swiftly brought him as an actor. This intervention had been for some time desired in France. One group of politicians was uneasy lest militarism should gain too large an influence in France. It resented the unquestioned powers of Joffre; finding therein a menace to the republican ideal. Others, as we have seen, were gravely concerned by the heavy casualties of 1914-1916, and feared their country would, at the close of the war, have too small an army to secure its national rights in the peace competition. The removal of Joffre and the appointment of a new man afforded the opportunity they wished for. The civil power could now be introduced with something like effect. It could take a hand in the military plans; above all, perhaps, it could force to the front, as between

the Allies, the question of the line—how many kilometres the French, how many the British divisions, should hold.

Scarcely had the French Government intervened than the British Government followed suit automatically. But, whilst intervening, we are told that the British civil authority did not wish to go as far as did the French at this period. It wished to draw the line at the actual plans, in any detail, of the leaders in the field. It has been stated by several French writers, for instance, that, at the conference in London in mid-March 1917 as to the coming offensive, a French representative—M. Ribot—suggested that Nivelle should explain his plan of operations to date ; but a member of the British War Cabinet objected—we did not want the plan gone into anew, provided the military chiefs were in agreement. This seems like sound policy. On the other hand, is it practicable for the civil authority to take this line one day, whilst on another it decides to adopt and authorise a large military scheme whether its own military chief approves or not ? We shall find that, at the end of February 1917, the British took the latter line, but a fortnight later took the former. Surely, if the civil authority is going to intervene decisively in military operations, it will have to study, closely, the full plans. A middle course in this matter is not convincing.

Great were the hopes raised in France by the forthcoming Nivelle offensive ; yet scarcely greater than the hopes raised by the safe arrival of the civilian strategists on the scene.

It was felt in France that the nation had now laid hold of the reins, and might soon drive the war chariot to victory.

Undoubtedly there were certain matters in which the active intervention of the civil authority in France really was called for. Notably, there was the railway question. The Nivelle offensive included an attack by our armies north of the Somme, but scarcely had the British Government resolved to support the new scheme than they discovered that the defective state of the transportation service

behind our lines was a serious bar to success. Nivelle called for an offensive there in February, but he had overlooked the fact that the Chemin de Fer du Nord was unequal to the strain. We had to point out that the railway, which was wholly under French direction, had not enough rolling stock. Unless this was remedied, it would be impossible for the British to begin an offensive early in the year. No steps were taken to set the matter right, and G.H.Q. was compelled to apply to the War Cabinet. The War Cabinet in its turn appealed to the French Government: it feared that, unless the capacity of the Nord Railway was greatly strengthened, it would be impossible to carry out in time the plans so strongly recommended by MM. Doumerque and Lacaze; and, according to a French memorandum on the subject, it proposed among other things 'que des mesures soient prises pour évacuer de la zone des armées britanniques autant de civils et de réfugiés qu'il sera nécessaire pour soulager les chemins de fer des demandes excessives pour le ravitaillement de cette population.' Ultimately, the French Minister for War, General Lyautey, took charge of this matter, installing a new director over the Nord Railway. This transportation problem appears to have been made the pretext by the civil authorities for calling the Calais Conference at the close of February 1917—at which, however, it was relegated, as a minor matter, to a sub-committee!¹ There seems to have been a suspicion among the zealots around Nivelle that the British Army was raising fictitious difficulties in the way of the stroke which was to destroy the German Armies: and probably this suspicion was not quite removed till we started the Battle of Arras, on April 9, and did all that was expected of us—and more.

¹ Though at this period the Nord Railway's efforts were inadequate to the preparations our Army had to make for the Allied offensive, it did fine work during the war and was active and enterprising behind the troops when we were pursuing the enemy in 1918. The Nord Railway authorities have fully acknowledged the aid they received at various times from the British Army, which took over to them in all more than 56,000 wagons and 1200 locomotives by steam-ferry from Richborough.

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The question of the line, and the length of it which the British troops should hold, had hitherto been settled amicably between the British and French Commanders-in-Chief. But, the intervention of the civil authorities now being the order of the day, Nivelle appealed to his Government in this matter. The British Commander-in-Chief had been willing to discuss the relief of the French Army, as soon as Nivelle appealed to him on December 21, 1916, but he had to consider his troops who had taken by far the greater share in the fighting on the Somme. He could not at once fall in with the full demands of Nivelle in regard to the line. They were too exaoting. By the close of December 1916 it had been agreed between the two that the British Army should relieve the French as far as the Bretonneux road within the next month : we were expecting the arrival of six more divisions from home. This did not satisfy Nivelle, who thought we ought to take a larger share, speedily, as he was pressing for a very early start—regardless of the fact that our Russian and Italian Allies could not be ready for some months yet—and he wished for a definite date to be fixed. So, instead of continuing his direct negotiations with the British Army, he looked for support to the French Government, which in turn applied to the British War Cabinet. In his anxiety to get things done exactly as he wished, Nivelle placed himself in the grip of the civilian authority—not foreseeing that this power would presently prove his undoing.¹

As a result, in mid-January 1917 a conference was held in

¹ It was different during Joffre's command. He found small time or inclination to answer French politicians' inquiries as to the strength or plans of the British Army in France. He felt it his duty to inform even the French Minister for War in May 1916 that the British regarded such matters as secret. 'C'est pourquoi je ne puis indiquer ici le nombre des divisions britanniques actuellement en France, ni celui des grandes unités dont l'envoi est prévu. Je me vois obligé, pour des raisons analogues, de ne pas divulguer les chiffres des Anglais présents sur le front français. Quant à la coopération militaire il est impossible d'en préciser l'importance.' An excellent example of the true spirit of 'unity of command' then existing between the two armies.

London. It was settled that the offensive should start not later than April 1, on a scheme arranged between the two Commanders-in-Chief; but, if unsuccessful, it was to be ended by mutual agreement. At this conference the proposal for a British attack in the north, with the Belgian Army, was accepted, the French Nieuport forces to assist by the relief of certain of our divisions and by pinning down the enemy by strong attacks. This scheme, however, could not be well defined, for Nivelle was intent only on his offensive on the Aisne. He let it be understood that he attached no real value or use to any other scheme of offensive.

The whole plan might, of course, fall through on the Western Front if the Germans were ahead of us in their preparations and delivered a heavy blow first: a possibility not overlooked at this conference. As a fact, the Germans were ahead of the Allies in their preparations, not for an offensive but for their sensational retreat to the Hindenburg Line which presently was to embarrass the Nivelle scheme.

As to the holding of the line, it was settled that by March 1 the French Army should be relieved as far as the Amiens-Royc road. Thus any prospect the British troops may have had of recuperation and rest after the tremendous rigour of the Battle of the Somme disappeared in January 1917. Civilian censors of the Somme, who had lately been deploring that our troops were put to such cruel strain and loss there, were thus ready to exact fresh and heavy exertions from the British divisions.

It will be found that, when the question of the line was raised in the presence of the British Government or its representatives, the Government usually decided to put more work on the British troops. Such was its decision at the conference in London on January 15, 1917; at Versailles a year or so later; and on several other occasions. The British War Cabinet appears not to have realised the importance of rest and of training for troops who for over two and a half years in France had to play chief part in every great offensive with the exception of Nivelle's on the Aisne. This is a strange fact, and hard to account for,

seeing that constantly our leadership impressed on the Government at home the importance both of training for the new divisions and of rest after heavy fighting.

What was needed after the Somme was a clear and hearty understanding between the Allies to this effect : 1914, 1915, and part of 1916 had been very heavy years for the French Army ; therefore why not leave clearly to the new and growing British Army henceforth the duty of the offensive, whilst the French shouldered the duty of the defensive ? That would have been a fair and logical apportionment. It would have solved the incessant, irritating problem of the line. It would have enabled the new British divisions, as they came on the scene, to be thoroughly trained, which we were always aiming at between 1916 and 1918. To be thoroughly trained in modern campaigning, to adapt your troops speedily, thoroughly, to the new tactics as they arise—therein lies true imagination in war, and the science of keeping down casualties. We were constantly aiming at this and were constantly being put off our aim through this scramble over the line, and through the dearth of sufficient labour in 1916 and 1917.

CHAPTER XI

THE NIVELLE TRAGEDY (*Continued*)

THE Allies' conduct, from time to time, of the war which their armies and navies won for them is amazing to consider. According to Cicero soldiership abroad fails unless there is wise statesmanship at home. *Parvi enim sunt foris arma nisi est consilium domi*. Yet we were destined, despite the absence of *consilium domi*, to win through ultimately in the theatre that supremely mattered. Recalling, as an example of our home conduct of the war, the happy-go-lucky manner in which we plunged into the huge, costly Dardanelles adventure in 1915; or, in 1917, whipped up, even eloquently preached, revolution in Russia as a means to conquer Germany, though Germany was herself fomenting that revolution,¹ one is almost driven to superstition, asking oneself, did it much matter what was our strategy, for had it not been preordained that the Central Powers must go down despite the blunderbuss of Allied statecraft?

The Nivelle period is the classic example of blundering Allied statecraft on the Western Front. There may still be defenders of the way we plunged into the Dardanelles campaign; whilst—for anything one has ever heard from them to the contrary—the British ministerial zealots for the Russian Revolution as a war-winner may still hold that they by no means overrated its beneficence. But no honest Englishman who cares to look into the Nivelle period can view it with complaisance. A man may warmly defend Nivelle—who, whether he sinned or not, was certainly sinned

¹ 'How often had I not hoped for a revolution in Russia in order that the military burden might be alleviated! . . . Now it had come true. . . . I felt as if a weight had been removed from my chest.'—Ludendorff.

against by the civilians—or he may condemn Nivelle and eulogise those French Ministers who, between them, made his office impossible. But he is sure, none the less, to condemn the Nivelle period. It was a welter of incompetent counsel as soon as the two Governments took charge. They appeared to lay their heads together in order to reach half decisions or suspicious compromises, at the expense of both Commanders-in-Chief and of both armies in the field.

Which Government, French or British, contributed more liberally to the common fund of confusion which ended in the complete fiasco of the Nivelle scheme?—a fiasco which, had the Allies not been fortunate, might well have ended in their defeat in 1917. Some French soldiers would courteously lay the blame entirely on their own Government rather than ours. To them M. Ribot, Premier after the fall of M. Briand, and M. Painlevé, War Secretary, were 'principal villains' in the piece. But have they studied the British War Cabinet's conduct during this epoch? M. Painlevé's intervention was inconvenient in April and May 1917. But the outcry against him has been overdone. He came into office on March 21, 1917, and some of his critics seem to have regarded that day as a sort of German offensive—almost as bad as March 21 or May 27, 1918.

After our authorities at home had, despite Haig's misgivings as well as those of Pétain and other French generals, enthusiastically taken up Nivelle's scheme, they proceeded to a headstrong act at the very moment they should have been on their guard; we shall find the British War Cabinet recklessly placing Nivelle over the British Army just as he was proving himself wrong over a most important move by the enemy—namely, the retreat of the German Army, according to plan, from a wide extent of front, embraced by the Nivelle plan, to the Hindenburg Line.

In December 1916 Joffre, as we have seen, was discredited and removed under the Briand administration, for the supposed failure of the Battle of the Somme. Nivelle succeeded Joffre. In January 1917 the British restarted

operations on the Ancre. Fighting went in our favour about Beaumont Hamel, Beaucourt, Grandcourt, and Serre, through that month and February. Enemy counter-attacks did not succeed; and, towards the close of February, the German withdrawal from the river Ancre became obvious. It was in full swing in the last week of that month. Steadily there and farther south the British line advanced.

Meanwhile, what was happening on the French front? In that quarter the French were not systematically pressing the enemy as were we on the Ancre. Nevertheless, the enemy was beginning to stir there too, north of Soissons. From day to day the French G.A.N. was observing and announcing fresh signs of a German retreat. Franchet d'Espérey, who, succeeding Foch, commanded that group, recognised the nature of this movement and drew the attention of Nivelle to it. He was confident by March 4 that a big retreat was being made. His information, however, was coldly received by the French Higher Command.¹ Nivelle and his Staff and the Third Bureau, the bureau dealing with operations, did not believe in the possibility of a German retreat pending the great forthcoming French stroke on the Aisne. They are described by French officers attached to G.Q.G. at the time as indulging in ironic smiles at the expense of those who did. Was it likely a powerful, tenacious opponent would, of his own accord, give up any considerable extent of ground which he had fought so hard to secure? That was not the German method at all!

Yet the movement continued; the G.A.N. began to follow cautiously; and soon Nivelle and his Staff found themselves almost alone in making light of the great retreat. A wave of joy swept over France, followed by one of anger when the news spread that the enemy, as he retreated, was devastating the ground he abandoned.

¹ According to Nivelle, 'Il paraît peu vraisemblable que l'ennemi abandonne sans combat ou même sans résister à outrance l'un des principaux gages qu'il tient sur notre sol, c'est-à-dire la ligne la plus rapprochée de Paris, jalonnée par Roye-Noyon-Sissonne.'

Nivelle and his Staff came under a slight cloud ; they had made their first obvious mistake.

By the middle of March, Roye and Lassigny on the French side had been abandoned by the Germans, as had Bapaume on the British front. The French were to the south of St. Quentin, which the British were approaching on the north. The retreat to the Hindenburg Line had become general. It had, of course, to be admitted by Nivelle and his Staff as by every one else. But the recognition came tardily. A large body of French opinion, military as well as civil, was aggrieved that Hindenburg's strategic retreat had cheated the new Generalissimo, and menaced his plans for the offensive.

Moreover, people began to turn over in their minds again the Battle of the Somme, and the humiliation of Joffre and Foch two or three months before. If that battle had not struck the enemy a hard blow, why was he retreating in February and March 1917 ? Why was he giving up positions which would be of manifest advantage to him in any future move he might hope to make towards Paris ? There were not wanting at this time people who said that Nivelle, after all, was reaping the results of the work done by Joffre and Foch (in conjunction with the British) on the Somme in 1916. They were right. The pressure by the British on the Ancre in the autumn of 1916, followed up by the smaller operations early in 1917, led, as we have shown, to the retreat before Ludendorff's chosen time.

Herein was one of the obvious and earlier justifications of the strategy of the Somme, though we had to wait two years for Ludendorff to make his admissions.

But as for our own critics of the Somme strategy and British leadership especially, *they* were in no mood to confess they had erred. On the contrary, they saw in the retreat only a fresh sign that our Army had been led without vision, and that a masterly German retreat had duped us !

They allowed themselves to be imposed on by adroit German military propaganda—these ardent lovers of every country—or its strategy—but their own,

What was the attitude of the British War Cabinet ? It had come into military power. It was to intervene with the French Government in the conduct of the campaign on the Western Front. Hence it was the business of the War Cabinet to post itself thoroughly in all that was going forward there. Before the close of February it should have been studying—with the 'large maps' once recommended by the late Lord Salisbury—these significant movements of the German Army opposite our own and the French front. The Cabinet could not complain that it was left in the dark by Haig. On February 26 it met the two Commanders-in-Chief and the representatives of the French Government at Calais ; and at that conference maps were produced from our G.H.Q. illustrating the German preparations for a withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line. The enemy had been falling back between February 17 and 25 in a marked manner. Nivelle thought the withdrawal purely local ; and no doubt the ultimate extent of it was, then, arguable. It would have been reasonable enough for the Cabinet to adopt a cautious or non-committal line : 'Wait and see' is at times necessary in war. The Cabinet was not called on to embrace either the British leader's idea that the retreat pointed to a withdrawal of the German Army on a great scale, or the French leader's idea that there was no retreat.

What did the Cabinet do ? Forthwith it declared that Nivelle must be placed over the British Army. So that just when Nivelle's views were beginning to be falsified by great events in the field—events which must leave a part of his scheme for attack in the air—he was declared Generalissimo by the British Government. Can a less intelligent decision be imagined ? If the British Ministers had decided to put Nivelle over the British Army in December or January, there might have been some excuse for them. But no—they wait until the Battle of the Ancre, so skilfully devised and mounted, is seen to be yielding beneficent results for the Allied cause ; and then they overlook Nivelle's wrong view as to the German retreat and proclaim him, in effect, Generalissimo.

We may be told they did not understand these German movements on the British and French fronts, and left such technical matters 'to the soldiers.' And it is probable they did not understand, and were not interested in, the matter; had no idea how a German retreat might postpone or annul on a long line of front the plans for the coming offensive. But in that case, surely, the less War Cabinet they. What right has the inexpert, least of all the inexpert in a Cabinet, to dabble on the purely military side in the conduct of war; not only to dabble, but, in a matter of high importance, to decide? ¹

The appointment of Nivelle as Generalissimo was nothing, then, if not inopportune. The British War Cabinet did the wrong thing in the wrong manner, but, above all, did it at the wrong time. Nivelle made light of an enemy move which must largely affect the Allied offensive—whereat he was promptly put over the British Army by the British Government.

What would the British public have thought of this decision, had it known? But the British public was not permitted to know. It seems there must have been something at least in the nature of a plot at this time against our leadership in France; and the plot had to be kept dark. French malcontents had just got rid of their two leading generals. Is it doing our malcontents a harsh injustice to suggest they wished to make a trinity of Somme Allied culprits—to add Haig to Foch and Joffre? Absolute proof of this may be wanting. Such evidence of a plot as exists—or at any rate is now procurable—might not pass in a court of law. But the circumstances of the Calais Conference are

¹ Apparently as late as August 7, 1918, the British Prime Minister remained an admirer of the Nivelle plan. He told the House of Commons on that day (*Times*, August 8, 1918): 'He [Nivelle] had a great strategic plan for a combined attack upon the German Army . . . he was the first general in this war who devised the plan of attack on a wide front which the Germans have followed with such success since then.' This was the speech in which the Prime Minister claimed the capture of Vimy Ridge by the British Army as the fruit of 'the first experiment in "unity of command"'! The facts about Vimy have already been stated and will be referred to again on a later page.

very suspicious. Ostensibly, it was, as we have seen, summoned to deal with the important but unsensational question of the capacity of the Nord Railway. Actually, the business in hand was to give Nivelle power to direct Haig. This was sprung as a surprise on Haig. He knew nothing about it until the Prime Minister communicated to the Conference the decision of the War Cabinet. So shabby a trick had never before been played on a Commander-in-Chief in the field by a British Government. Why was not the plan made known to him before the Conference, or why was not his resignation asked for? The right answer to this has not impossibly been suggested by an acute French writer already referred to. M. Abel Ferry says in his book, *La Guerre, vue d'en-bas et d'en-haut*: 'Est-il vrai que, comme le Gouvernement français eut alors le soupçon, Lloyd George ait voulu se servir de notre Gouvernement pour démissionner le Général en Chef anglais?' 'Est-il vrai que ne se sentant pas assez de forces pour modifier son Haut Commandement le Gouvernement britannique a cherché dans ce conflit à multiples formes, l'occasion d'entraîner le Gouvernement français lui-même dans une intrigue contre le Maréchal Douglas Haig?'¹

The trifling incident of the interview with the British Commander-in-Chief, reported in the French Press in February 1917, may be worth recalling in this connection. Some French journalists were anxious to get in touch with the Commander-in-Chief. They sought his views as to whether we could hope eventually to break through the German lines. He told them there was not the smallest doubt we should break through. This was worked up into the form of an interview and published. As a fact, the Commander-in-Chief believed the writers merely wished for information to serve them against the spirit of despondence which, after the Somme,

¹ Several French books, such as *L'Offensive de 1917* (Civrieux), and *La Bataille de l'Aisne* (Rousset), refer to this matter, and purport to record private conversations by British authorities as to the best way of serving Nivelle. Also, they quote from the secreted 'Rapport Béranger.' The subject is repulsive, and the writer has not troubled to examine closely into its intrigues.

was rife in some French quarters. He had no wish to be interviewed in the journalistic sense. The interview was wired to England, and some foolish questions were asked about it in the House of Commons. The Government, in an evasive reply, appeared to suggest that the interview ought not to have been given except with the solemn sanction of itself; though, throughout the war, Ministers themselves managed complacently to be interviewed over all manner of things.

The incident was trivial, but it indicated the ungracious attitude of the Government towards our leadership in France. These Ministers—who can honestly doubt it?—would have welcomed the retirement at this time, and later, of the Commander-in-Chief, but they had not the courage to ask outright for it—as the French Government had done in the case of Joffre and Foch. They feared the indignation of the British Army at the front. They were not sure they were strong enough to override the British public at home or perhaps even the British Parliament, though that would have been an easier matter no doubt.

The Conference at Calais on February 26 and 27 might serve the War Cabinet's purpose as effectually; and it would be so much safer.

Many accounts of this Conference and its decisions have been given, not a few of them in print in France. In parts they have been full and correct enough, in other parts defective or wrong. The Prime Minister at this Conference announced the decision of the War Cabinet to give Nivelle command of the whole of the forthcoming offensive. A scheme had to be drawn up by which the British Commander-in-Chief was instructed to conform to Nivelle's strategic directions;¹ except in as far as he might consider the safety of the British Army jeopardised or its opportunities of success

¹ On November 19, 1917, Mr. Lloyd George stated in the House of Commons: 'The whole campaign of the year has been the result of the advice of soldiers.' He did not mention that the Nivelle campaign was supported and authorised by the British Government against the advice of the British soldiers—against Haig and Robertson, the C.-in-C. and the C.I.G.S.

prejudiced thereby, in which case he had the power of appeal to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff for the information of the British War Cabinet.

This arrangement was to cover the period between the signing of the document and the beginning of the offensive. The British Commander-in-Chief would be instructed by the War Cabinet to conform to the French directions after the start of the attack.

He would be allowed to decide on his own method of fighting within the area allotted to him by the French leader.

The two Governments were to decide when the forthcoming operations should be considered closed; after which, there would be a return to the system of independent command.

* * * * * * *

Such was the decision at Calais. Could a better one have been devised for securing disunity of command before the operations, during, and perhaps after, them? ¹ The British Commander-in-Chief's power was decreased. His responsibility, if anything, was increased; for, if Nivolle acted rashly, and the British Army suffered thereby a disaster, the British leader would be to blame unless he had appealed to the War Cabinet through the C.I.G.S. and the War Cabinet had decided against him. But suppose Nivelle in an emergency had pressed for the British Army to take instantly some dangerous step, how could the Commander-in-Chief of that Army ask him to wait till the War Cabinet at home had thrashed out the matter? The enemy has to be considered in such a contingency; and who could expect the enemy to wait on the decision, however sapient, of the British War Cabinet? We shall find a similar arrangement made in April 1918. It must always be an extremely inconvenient feature of so-called 'unity of command' under a generalissimo where two great armies of different nations are fighting as

¹ On August 7, 1918, the Prime Minister told the House of Commons (*Times*, August 8, 1918): 'I tried to the best of my power to achieve unity, but I had to approach it by easy stages.' Whether the Nivelle appointment was one of these easy stages he did not state.

Allies ; and no one has yet suggested a way of avoiding it. But in 1918, as we shall see by and by, there were circumstances which made the arrangement more promising : though even then it was more than once imperilled by the action of the British Government.

The first period, then, provided for by the two Governments at the Calais Conference on February 27, referred to the leadership during the preparation for the offensive, the second to the actual operations. French writers have correctly given, in the matter, the text :—

‘ 1. Attendu que l’armée française dispose d’effectifs plus considérables que l’armée britannique, le Cabinet de guerre reconnaît que la direction générale de la campagne doit appartenir au Commandant en Chef de l’armée française ;

‘ 2. Pour la période comprise entre la signature de la présente convention et le début des opérations, le Cabinet de guerre s’engage à donner au Maréchal Douglas Haig l’ordre de se conformer aux vues du Général Nivelle en ce qui concerne la conduite des opérations, étant convenu qu’il sera libre de choisir les moyens.

‘ 3. Les opérations terminées, la convention tombe.’

* * * * *

In the mere fact that the War Cabinet, working in with the French Government, placed the British forces temporarily under Nivelle, there is no sign of a plot, one may be told ; and this even though the step was secreted from the British Commander-in-Chief and C.I.G.S. till the Conference. Well, let us assent to this. Let the secretion of such a step be regarded as ill-bred and highly improper, but not necessarily the act of plotters who wished to rid themselves of a Commander-in-Chief, but felt that owing to the army in the field and the nation at home they were not strong enough to do it by direct action as the French had boldly done in the case of their own leaders in the field.

Unfortunately for the credit of this Conference summoned by civilian war-meddlers and muddlers, there was another incident which certainly argues the device of plotters against not only the Commander-in-Chief but also the integrity of

the British Army. A document was called for and produced at Calais on February 26 which sketched out a kind of *amalgam* of French and British Armies.

The idea of this scheme was to reform away our G.H.Q., and to spatchcock together a French and British Staff in its stead. The British were to enjoy the office of Chief of this General Staff, the French were to enjoy the Commander-in-Chief.

The British Commander-in-Chief? Yes, there was to be such a person, nominally. But operations were not to be in his department. Oh no! out of him was to be concocted a sort of Adjutant-General.

Was this scheme in any way an outcome of the various demands or suggestions then flying about for making the two armies one army, for amalgamating Allied armies, army corps, divisions, battalions even? One cannot tell. The origin of the document—which was called for by the British War Cabinet and supplied by the French—is obscure. Haig knew nothing about it. The C.I.G.S., Sir William Robertson, knew nothing about it. Nivelle and Lyautey, the French Secretary of State for War, declared they had never seen it till they got into the special train that brought them, on February 26, 1917, to Calais. Ultimately, this project was not adopted. It was regarded as impracticable. It was bundled away. So that page of history is blotted out. Probably some may attribute the scheme to the Staff behind the French Generalissimo. Who can tell? So many things have been attributed to that Staff, by French as well as British. Certainly, if the scheme had been adopted the Conference ought to have been held not at Calais but at Colney Hatch.

The other scheme having been adopted, the Conference dispersed. It was duly initialled by the members of the Governments and by the soldiers.

The British Commander-in-Chief initialled it as being a correct account of the proceedings of these two days at Calais, not in any way as indicating his approval thereof. A fact always to be borne in mind.

The question may here be asked, Should Haig, in the circumstances, have resigned rather than suffer himself to be subordinated to a leader whose projects he viewed with grave doubt ? A soldier, absolutely loyal to our leadership—one who did fine service on the Western Front—told the writer that this was the solitary instance in which he differed from the British Commander-in-Chief : his view being that Haig should have resigned. We venture to take a directly opposite view. If Haig had resigned, his place would promptly have been filled by one who would have done nothing to restrain Nivelle. The British Government would obviously have chosen as Haig's successor a man who would have fallen in with the French scheme without further ado, as M. Briand demanded. Nivelle would have 'directed' then with a vengeance. Vimy Ridge would certainly not have been secured by the British—and that alone would have been disastrous to the Allied Armies, if not in 1917, certainly in 1918.

The Commander-in-Chief of a great army in modern war has responsibilities and duties that are unparalleled in the public service to-day. The notion that, as modern war must be won, in the main, by intensive preparations in the charge of a large number of administrators, it does not therefore greatly matter who is Commander-in-Chief in the field, is a particularly ignorant notion. The character, the skill, the far-sighted wisdom of a Commander-in-Chief in the field matter supremely to-day ; matter at least as much in modern war as in the time of Wellington, Napoleon, or Marlborough. The Commander-in-Chief to-day is responsible for all the vast preparations, which he must watch and co-ordinate : and he is responsible for the actual operations. He has no moral right to throw up his command in a huff because the civil power at home takes a rash step in secret which he disapproves of. He is not engaging in a private business in which he need consult only his own private feelings. He is the servant of the nation. He is responsible for the safety of the great army in the field ; and must absolutely subordinate his own dignity and natural pride

to the best ultimate interests of nation and army. There was at least one occasion during the period 1916-1918 when the British Commander-in-Chief, it is true, caused it to be known that if a certain step was taken by the Allied Governments he must resign—namely, when an attempt was made to put an intolerable burden on the British troops in regard to taking over more line from the French. But in this Nivelle case it would have been thoroughly bad for the nation and the army if the Commander-in-Chief had resigned.

The Nivelle appointment was a *fait accompli* when he first heard of it. It was not in his power to prevent that rash act. On the other hand he could and did prevent, in a glaring instance, the perilous line project. In regard to Nivelle's appointment he chose the wisest course in the circumstances. He quietly held on; and presently, as we shall see, was able to check the impulsiveness and obstinacy of the new Generalissimo, and in a matter of high importance to lessen the peril to the British Army.

The circumspection of the British Commander-in-Chief, the cool way in which without chatter he waited and watched on this occasion, are a lesson for soldiers harassed by bad statesmanship. We shall find him displaying the same qualities a year later when the problem of the general reserve faced him, and succeeding ultimately by much the same method. A curiously interesting study in not only war but also psychology!

* * * * *

Meantime, whilst the Allies were talking about plans, the Germans were retreating according to plan, in which the military power was not impaired or impeded by the civil.

As far back as the time when the Chantilly arrangements of November 1916 still held good, it had been foreseen at British Headquarters that the enemy might well abandon the very awkward salient between the Ancre and the Scarpe. Therefore our leadership had resolved, for the Allied spring offensive, on an attack at the Vimy Ridge as well as farther south, both being, in any case, preliminary to an attack

in Flanders which promised strategic results that fighting in these other areas did not.

Now early in 1917 the work of the British Army on the Ancre was, as Colonel Boraston has shown, hastening the German preparations for the retreat. Ludendorff has given us a sketch of the position as he and Hindenburg viewed it at the close of 1916. The fact that the Allies were now able to add enormously to their output of munitions of war disturbed him. He thought that this might lead to an even greater demoralisation of his troops 'than had been achieved on the Somme'—disagreeable reading this for those who held that the British strategy and tactics of the Somme achieved merely a vast destruction of our resources. Ludendorff felt, he tells us, that 'Somme fighting would soon break out at various points on our fronts in 1917 and . . . even our troops would not be able to withstand such attacks indefinitely.'

He goes on to describe the position on the Somme front early in 1917 as 'tense.' He expected fresh British attacks there and in Flanders. The British Army was growing, German man-power ebbing—it was absolutely necessary to retire to the new Siegfried positions, the construction of which had been begun in September 1916. 'The decision to retreat was not reached without a painful struggle. . . . But it was necessary for military reasons, we had no choice.'

On February 4 orders were given for the 'Great Retreat' to start on March 16. But 'under enemy pressure' it might be necessary to begin a little earlier. And it was necessary: our pressure on the Ancre in February hurried Ludendorff up—though, candid in much that he relates, he omits this.

As a fact, Haig and his Staff had foreseen a good deal which Ludendorff foresaw; but which, unfortunately, was not at all grasped by (1) Nivelle and his Staff; (2) Mr. Lloyd George and his Cabinet; (3) M. Briand and his Cabinet. 'Unity of command,' it is said, was being aimed at by the two Governments who promoted the Conference at Calais: but if only they had aimed at unity of information, unity

of intelligence about the probable movements of the enemy early in 1917, the Calais Conference might have served some useful purpose.

The enemy was retreating to escape, as far as he could, renewed 'Somme fighting,' as Ludendorff styles it; to get rid of an awkward salient; and to shorten his line on the Western Front. That is exactly what British G.H.Q. had been thinking about for some time past, and calculating on as a possible German strategic move. Our Intelligence Department had calculated that, early in 1917, the total German forces on the Western Front would amount to not more than 129 divisions—102 in line—or 1314 battalions; whilst the Allied Armies were now steadily increasing. Hence some such movement by the German Army, as we were looking for, was likely enough.

But Nivelle would not hear of it—until it had become established fact. He resented its discussion as an indication of want of faith towards his coming offensive on the Aisne. Hence unfortunate differences arose between the Commanders-in-Chief, and immediately after the Calais Conference they were accentuated. The Governments intervened afresh. Whilst subordinating the British leader to the strategic directions of Nivelle, the British War Cabinet, as we have seen, held the former responsible for the safety of our forces. According to some French authorities in the matter Nivelle regarded the British leader's views on this head as '*Ses craintes hypothétiques*'; for example, '*Sa manière de voir au sujet du repli allemand de l'Ancre.*' As a consequence, M. Briand's Government represent that:—

'Le parti pris de ne pas accepter les décisions de la conférence de Calais.

'La tendance toujours renouvelée à remettre en question le plan d'opérations accepté par la conférence où siégeaient les chefs des Gouvernements.

'Une tendance caractéristique à ne pas prendre l'initiative des opérations manifestées par éloges de tout ce que peuvent faire ou projeter les Allemands.'

The French Government go on to insist that Nivelle's

demands shall be at once complied with by the British Commander-in-Chief, otherwise the offensive will be retarded. Their tone—corresponding with that of Nivelle—becomes peremptory. ‘Le Maréchal Douglas Haig doit être mis en demeure de se conformer sans retard . . . aux instructions du Général Nivelle’! They want no more nonsense from a mere British Commander-in-Chief who has just been subordinated to the great French genius Nivelle. M. Briand becomes indignant. Nivelle, whilst the two Governments treat thus with one another, busies himself with his directives, etc. Particularly he presses that the British Military Mission agreed on at Calais shall be at once established at his headquarters. Apparently he would prefer this mission to represent the C.I.G.S. in London rather than the British leader in the field: whilst Lyautey is credited with a desire that it should be attached to himself rather than to Nivelle. Differences of view grow more pronounced—bitter fruit of the Calais Conference. Within a fortnight of that Conference, we are told, Nivelle is declaring shrilly that the control which he exercises on the manner in which the British leader shall arrange his plans for the British effort in the forthcoming offensive is not enough. He must treat directly with the British C.I.G.S. However:—

‘Celui-ci répond le 13 mars, avec bon sens, ces paroles qui sont comme l’épithète de l’unité de commandement tant recherchée: “Depuis quel temps,” écrit le Général Robertson, “nous avons examiné et établi bien des conventions, mais la chose la plus essentielle de toutes est que nous travaillions ensemble avec cordialité et que nous ayons les uns dans les autres une entière confiance.”’ (*La Guerre vue d’en-bas et d’en-haut*, by Abel Ferry, p. 198.)

Exactly: the first essential for success was that the Commanders in the field should be allowed to work cordially together and should have confidence in one another, as during the period of Joffre’s leadership in 1916. But this essential had been overlooked by those who convened the Calais Conference, and there established disunity of command.

Owing perhaps to the exertions of the chivalrous French Minister, Lyautey, a fine soldier and a gentleman, who understood the true British point of view, the differences between the leaders were presently adjusted. The British Military Mission under Major-General Sir Henry Wilson at Nivello's headquarters did good work; and by the middle of March the position was more or less clarified through a conference at the War Office in London.¹

It is true this settlement of various points in dispute did not meet with the approval of extremists around Nivello; whilst, oddly enough, some of that general's severe French critics condemned it as being a concession to British military leadership. They did not believe in Nivello—but they resented his power as Generalissimo being restricted. Patriotic, perhaps, but illogical. Yet the London arrangement was a workable one. It smoothed over some of the difficulties; and before the spring offensive is over we shall find Haig heartily supporting Nivello against those who were engaged in belittling and undermining that general—one of the most singular ironies of the war in France.

By this settlement, Nivello was in future only to communicate with the authorities of the British Army through its Commander-in-Chief; though exceptions were made in regard to neighbouring armies and units, and powers were given to our Military Mission in this matter. The British Commander-in-Chief, for his part, would supply all necessary information as to his operation orders and their execution.

¹ M. Painlevé's note on the conflict between the French and British Higher Commands is worth quoting. 'L'attaque projetée de la 5^e armée anglaise tombait, dès lors, dans le vide. Cet événement provoquait un conflit immédiat entre les hauts commandements français et anglais, conflit que rendait plus aigu la forme impérative et peu protocolaire de la première directive adressée le 27 février par le grand Quartier Général au maréchal Haig, en vertu de l'accorde signé la veille à Calais. La jugeant inacceptable dans la forme et dangereuse quant au fond, le maréchal Haig la transmettait à Londres sans répondre et saisisait son gouvernement des inquiétudes que lui inspirait l'attaque projetée dans les conditions que créait le repli allemand. La grande offensive britannique n'allait-elle pas, désormais, être un coup d'épée dans l'eau, cependant que l'ennemi, sachant que le gros des forces anglaises donnait dans le vide, frapperait plus au nord?' (*La Revue de Paris*, 15 Décembre, 1921).

The British forces were to remain under the orders of their leaders and Commander-in-Chief.

If the assistance of British divisions was asked for by Nivelle, Haig would do his utmost to comply. Any division of our Army thus lent to the French might receive direct operation orders from French leadership. That was a reasonable concession, and was applied several times in 1918 : it bore no resemblance to the insulting proposal (still lingering in various quarters at the time) that the *amalgam* should be applied to the British Army.

To clear away any further misunderstanding, it was necessary for the British Commander-in-Chief to add to the text a note which perhaps had better be reproduced here not only in English but in French, as it has been quoted and commented on a good deal by writers in France who have treated of the Nivelle period :

The French version :¹—

‘J’accepte la convention ci-dessus, étant toutefois bien entendu que je suis parfaitement décidé à appliquer l’accord de Calais dans son esprit et dans sa lettre. L’armée britannique et son chef seront considérés par général Nivelle comme des alliés et non comme subordonnés sauf pendant les opérations particulières qu’il a exposées à conférence Calais. En outre, tout en acceptant la convention relative aux attributions mission britannique, il doit être entendu que ces attributions seront sujettes aux modifications dont expérience fera ressortir la nécessité.’

The British Commander-in-Chief’s declaration :—

‘While I am fully determined to carry out the Calais Agreement in spirit and letter, the British Army and its Commander-in-Chief will be regarded by General Nivelle as Allies, and not as subordinates except during the particular operations which he explained at the Calais Conference. Further, while I also accept the Agreement respecting the functions of the British Mission at French Headquarters, it should be understood that these functions should be subject to modification as experience shows to be necessary.’

¹ This is taken from M. Abel Ferry’s book, p. 199.

Critics in France—in Great Britain the incident has been passed over as immaterial or not fit for discussion—seem to have deplored this note as killing ‘unity of command.’ No! on the contrary, it was an attempt to forward ‘unity of command’; to re-establish cordial, honourable relations between the Allied chiefs. And, at any rate, the arrangement and the establishment of the Military Mission at Beauvais under Sir Henry Wilson—on the lines which Haig recommended—were followed by something like a fair working partnership between the Allied Armies. They were able to get forward with their preparations for the offensive of the following month.

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One of the differences between the two leaders and their Staffs must now be mentioned. It concerned the Vimy operations. That was a profoundly important matter; though for its full significance we have to recall the great German offensive in March 1918 as well as the British operations in April 1917. In a speech during the war,¹ Mr. Lloyd George, lightly touching on the Nivelle period, claimed that the operations in April 1917 gave us ‘that great bastion,’ Vimy Ridge. He was right in claiming that capture as a great stroke towards ultimate victory in the war. But, as mentioned in Chapter I., he did not give the House of Commons and the public the history of that affair. Did he know it? Let us, in order to be perfectly fair, assume he did not know it. Had Mr. Lloyd George known that the Allies owed this blessing to British leadership despite the strong opposition of Nivelle, it is really incredible that he would have held back that essential fact.

The facts are these. As far back as the winter of 1916-1917, when the Chantilly plans for the coming year were, nominally, still standing, the British Commander-in-Chief intended his attack in 1917 to include Vimy Ridge. Nivelle, on succeeding Joffre, opposed this. For one thing, he and his Staff, as we have seen, would not consider the possibility of the Germans withdrawing to the Hindenburg Line. It

¹ Namely, in the House of Commons in August 1918

was to them incredible. We pointed out to him that, if they did withdraw, any preparations for attack we made against their frontier south of the point where the Hindenburg Line joins the old Somme front system of defence (that is, close to Neuville Vitasse) would be thrown away.

Haig and his Staff were right, the French completely wrong. By the middle of March the Germans were in full retreat, and all idea of a British offensive south of this point had to be abandoned—the same thing applying to certain areas on the French front which Nivelle had meant to figure considerably in his plans for the rupture of the enemy's line.

When, therefore, in the first half of March it became necessary to modify our plans for the British stroke, Nivelle and his Staff grew peremptory as to the new dispositions of our forces. An important attack on the Fifth Army front being now out of the question, we decided that the troops and guns set free by the German retreat should be used farther north. This was clearly a matter for the British Commander-in-Chief to decide on—in fact it was his bounden duty. But Nivelle intervened. He proposed, for instance, to remove six divisions from the Fifth Army for the reinforcement of the Third and Fourth British Armies. We intended not to reinforce the Fourth Army at this time, but to reinforce the Arras-Vimy sector of attack, and to place some additional reserves in this area. The object of Nivelle's intervention is somewhat obscure. Why were he and his Staff set against the capture of Vimy Ridge; and what use really did they wish to make of the divisions set free from the Fifth Army? The extraordinary scheme elaborated—somewhere—for an amalgamation of the British Headquarters Staff, and for the removal of the Commander-in-Chief from the field of operations, had, it is true, fallen through. The British Prime Minister himself had not seen his way to forward that at the Calais Conference. But the vague project of an *amalgame* applied to British units, large and small, had not yet quite disappeared. The attempt of Nivelle to interfere with the disposition of British divisions

—set free by the German retreat which he had not expected—rather suggests *amalgame* ambitions at this period. It is difficult, however, to penetrate into this *amalgame* intrigue. The British Army certainly can supply very little information about it. Our military leaders were not experts in the unravelling of plots or machinations in which civilian power works under cover. They were too honourable for that.

Whatever Nivelle wished to do with the released divisions of the Fifth Army—the rôle of which was now merely to follow up the retreating enemy to the Hindenburg Line—it is certain he, all through, opposed the British plan of capturing Vimy Ridge. When it became clear we were not going to abandon this project, the French suggested we should attack a portion only of the Ridge, and rest content with that! But the British Commander-in-Chief would not compromise in this matter. The Commander of the First Army, Horne, had thoroughly studied the question, and he, too, was set against a partial attempt. It was necessary we should secure the whole of Vimy Ridge in order to make safe the left flank of our coming attack at Arras.

The importance of Vimy Ridge is apparent to any intelligent person who was over the ground during the war or has examined it since. There is to-day a school of the garrulous who declare that all our fighting on the Western Front, before Foch was appointed in March 1918, was—as far as generalship goes—brainless and brutal. This school has appeared in print more than once during the last two years or so, and engaged the attention of the ‘uninformed imagination.’ Like a character in *Absalom and Achitophel*, it ‘thinks too little and it talks too much.’ If it desired to learn about the war, to get a fair perspective, it could hardly do better than go and study Vimy Ridge—which is no longer perilous as during the war—and the history of the fighting there in 1917 and 1918, as well as in previous years. There is no danger of exaggerating the prescience of the British military leaders who insisted on securing ‘that great bastion’ in 1917. Some members of Nivelle’s Staff, shortly before the attack, visited the Headquarters of the First Army, and

asked to see the plans for the coming assault on the Ridge. They were accommodated. After they had examined the plans, they failed to conceal their disapproval—even contempt. The Canadians had no chance of taking Vimy by such plans as these ! However, these plans were not, as a consequence of the visit, in the least degree changed : and in due course the whole of the long-contested Ridge was to fall into our hands. And having gained the Ridge we were to keep it. Previously the French had themselves attacked the Ridge and made most gallant attempts to secure it. But they failed to win more than a small portion of its western slopes.

The capture of the Ridge was immediately necessary in April 1917 for the security of the left flank of our Army in the Arras attack. But we recognise the immense value of the position by turning to the events of March and April 1918. In the furious assault which the Army of Von Boehm made on our First and Third Armies near Arras, the Ridge was one of his chief objectives. Ludendorff shows that in his observations on the German failure on March 28, 1918. But our possession of it was one of the causes of his complete defeat on that day. As Hindenburg and Ludendorff both admit, March 28, 1918, was an unfortunate day for Germany. The skill not only in the very fine counter-battery work of the First Army—perhaps the least advertised army, though one of the best-led armies in the war—and the splendid conduct of the troops : the credit for March 28, 1918, can first be accorded to these. But is it certain the enemy—who attacked with great force and courage—would have been thrown back as he was, if we had not held Vimy Ridge on that critical day ? Or suppose the enemy had held Vimy Ridge at the time of his attack on the Lys early in April 1918, and forced his way on to the Lorette spur near by. In that case he would have enjoyed observation over the French coal-fields, and have shelled them with effect. He might also have attacked us with effect on the right flank. The Lorette spur was one of his objectives in the great attack on the First Army on March 28, 1918.

The British decision, in spite of the persistent opposition of the French Staff, to capture the whole of Vimy was one of the only satisfactory features of the Nivelle period. True, the Battle of the Aisne also led, later, to the capture of the whole Chemin-des-Dames ridge which, begun in April, was completed by Pétain through a skilful, well-prepared operation at Malmaison late in 1917. But that, in its turn, led to a shocking repulse and slaughter of British and French troops on May 27, 1918, through bad generalship and worse Intelligence. The skill and success of the First Army at Vimy in 1917 were marred by no blunder of that nature.

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The differences between the Allied Staffs were, then, adjusted after the settlement in March in London. But it would be most unfair to Nivelle to overlook the fact that he was exposed to disheartening difficulties through other causes. The increasing coldness, even hostility, of the Ribot Ministry towards him and his strategy will be referred to later: it was evinced in glaring fashion just before and soon after he started his operations on the Aisne in April.

There was, however, another grave difficulty which declared itself earlier. At the beginning of 1917 an alarming 'pacifist' campaign was worked up in France, and began to spread to the fighting forces. It appears to have been a far more serious and menacing movement than anything of the kind in this country throughout the war. Nivelle quite realised this peril. He boldly attacked it. Almost immediately after the Calais Conference he addressed a straight, powerful letter to Lyautey, which must be here quoted in full. He had already discussed the question with Malvy, the Minister of the Interior, and called for Government action.

'J'ai l'honneur de vous faire connaître que j'ai signalé au ministre de l'Intérieur les faits de menées pacifistes suivants :

'Sous peine de compromettre gravement le moral des troupes, j'estime que des mesures sérieuses doivent être prises. Je vous serais obligé d'intervenir auprès de M. Malvy

en vue d'activer les mesures destinées à enrayer immédiatement ces menées.

' Les faits de propagande pacifiste aux armées se multiplient.

' *Les tracts.* Depuis plus d'un an, des tracts, brochures, journaux pacifistes parviennent aux armées. Il en sévit maintenant une véritable épidémie. On en arrête plus en 15 jours qu'on n'en saisissait en trois mois en 1916.

' Ces tracts émanent du *Libertaire*, du Comité pour la reprise des relations; syndicaliste, de la Fédération des métaux, du Syndicat des instituteurs, de l'anarchiste Sébastien Faure, principalement. Ils apportent le doute, quant à la justice de la cause pour laquelle les soldats se battent. Ils font l'apologie de l'Allemagne, affirment l'impossibilité de la victoire et prétendent que la paix seule résoudra les problèmes du charbon et de la vie chère.

' D'aucuns renferment les plus dangereuses indications et les pires conseils. Une brochure qui a circulé "en cas de guerre" décrit les procédés pratiques de sabotage et de fabrication des explosifs.

' Ces factures entament l'esprit d'offensive des combattants, les énervent, les découragent.

' *Les permissionnaires aux réunions.* Pendant leurs permissions, un certain nombre de soldats assistent à des réunions où, sous prétexte de traiter des questions corporatives, les chefs syndicalistes et anarchistes exposent les théories pacifistes. De retour aux tranchées, ils répètent à leurs camarades les arguments qu'ils ont entendus.

' *Militaires en relations avec les meneurs.* Quelques soldats restent en correspondance suivie avec les individus qui semblent conduire la propagande. Les lettres qu'ils leur adressent accusent réception de journaux, tracts, feuilles volantes qu'ils avouent avoir communiqués ou répandus. Certains ont pris l'initiative d'adresser collectives aux meneurs. Sébastien Faure, Merrheim, Hubert, Péricat, Hasfeld, H. Brion, Macheriakoff sont les propagandistes qui possèdent le plus de correspondants.

' *L'activité des meneurs sur les contingents alliés.* Ces chefs de file étendent leur influence jusque sur les contingents alliés. Des soldats belges correspondent avec Sébastien Faure et répandent ses écrits. Des soldats russes demandent

à Macheriakoff de leur faire parvenir par des voies détournées le journal révolutionnaire *Natchalo*.

' *L'action de quelques meneurs*. Trois d'entre ces meneurs mènent une action plus particulièrement intense et détestable : Merrheim, Sébastien Faure et Hubert. Ils paraissent l'âme de la propagande.

' Les lettres de leurs correspondants et celles qui font allusion à leur rôle prouvent qu'ils préparent une campagne d'agitation ouvrière qui aboutirait à un large mouvement pacifiste pour le 1^{er} mai. Si ce fait se produisait, le moral recevrait un coup sérieux aux armées.

' *L'agitation ouvrière*. Ainsi que je l'ai signalé dans ma lettre du 25 janvier dernier, au ministre de la Guerre, les difficultés ouvrières, les grèves dans les usines de guerre, la part prise par les mobilisés aux discussions qui engendrent les conflits, exercent l'action la plus fâcheuse sur les premières lignes.

' L'impression est devenue nettement déprimante lorsqu'on a su :

' 1. Que les mobilisés soutiennent de leurs deniers leurs camarades grévistes ;

' 2. Que dans certains cas, à Bourges notamment, ils ont osé se syndiquer ;

' 3. Que ceux d'entre eux qui travaillent dans les arsenaux sont des agents actifs de la propagande pacifiste ;

' 4. Que l'indiscipline règne dans les établissements de l'État, que l'on y distribue et que l'on y vend ouvertement, dans les ateliers, les tracts, manifestes et journaux pacifistes, qu'on y perd volontairement du temps, que le rendement y est bien inférieur au rendement moyen, que des malfaçons ont été commises ;

' 5. Qu'il s'agit là d'une situation générale s'étendant à Bourges, Paris, Pateaux, Tarbes, Toulon, Toulouse ;

' 6. Qu'elle gagne toutes les usines travaillant pour la défense nationale dans les départements de la Seine et de Meurthe-et-Moselle (Frouard) notamment ;

' 7. Qu'à l'instigation de la Fédération des métaux et de son secrétaire, Merrheim, les ouvriers refusent d'accepter le barème des prix élaborés par le ministère de l'Armement et préparent de nouvelles grèves ;

' 8. Qu'en dépit de la crise du charbon et de l'arrêt de

certaines usines de guerre occasionné par le manque de combustible, les mineurs du Pas-de-Calais décident de réduire la durée de leur travail ;

9. ' Les combattants ne peuvent comprendre que mobilisés et ouvriers réondent ainsi à leur désintéressement. Leur confiance dans la puissance de nos productions de guerre s'ébranle.

' *Campagne contre la culture des terres.* Enfin, au moment où la raréfaction des denrées oblige à recourir à des mesures restrictives et où on réclame pour l'agriculture des bras nouveaux, les combattants s'invitent de la campagne menée contre l'ensemencement des terres dans les départements de l'Allier et du Cher principalement.

' *Propositions.* Il y aurait lieu de saisir les tracts dans les imprimeries qui les tirent, d'interdire les réunions où les discussions ne se limitent pas à des questions strictement professionnelles, de supprimer le journal révolutionnaire russe *Natchalo*, d'empêcher les menées de Sébastien Faure, Merheim, Hubert, et de la douzaine d'agitateurs qui les appuient, de briser la propagande pacifiste et d'exiger un travail normal dans les usines de guerre et dans les arsenaux.

NIVELLE.'

Soldiers are unsuccessful when they intervene in politics. There is something in their calling that misfits them for this pursuit. As to pure party politics, or the 'party game,' when soldiers attempt to engage in this they invite ridicule. In all such discussions with accomplished politicians, they go down. Now, Nivello was mixing in party politics when he called the notice of first Malvy and then Lyautey to these 'pacifist' members of the Left and the extreme Left in French politics. He aroused angry protests—Malvy declaring his intervention a 'stab in the back'—and perhaps, when the Ribot Ministry succeeded that of Briand, Nivello's action increased the political animus against him. But the evil he called attention to was not imaginary. It was a growing evil. It had begun to affect the moral of the French fighting men. What followed in April and May argues that Nivello's statements were true; whilst, later, Pétain complained of the same evil and had to call on the French

Government to deal with it. It is difficult to see how Nivelle could have avoided the question, if the Government shrank from action.¹

In any case, the incident shows that the time was singularly unpropitious for starting on such an offensive as the French Higher Command and the French and British Governments pinned their faith to in January and February 1917. Was the British War Cabinet, when it enthusiastically adopted the scheme and placed Nivelle in supreme command, unaware of the evil? Nivelle states in his letter that he had already communicated on the subject with the French Minister of the Interior, and in January with the French Minister for War; and this letter itself was written only a matter of hours after the Calais Conference broke up. If the members of the British War Cabinet knew about the evil which Nivelle complained of, they surely ought to have reserved their judgment in February as to the ambitious Aisne stroke which was to break up the German Army in a day or two. However, whether they knew of the evil or not, and of its growing effect on French military moral, they do not appear to have taken it into consideration. They were in for a great gamble.

¹ Apparently, on the Minister of the Interior taking personal offence at this letter, and protesting, Nivelle withdrew it. But did Nivelle then or later admit that the contents of the letter were false and that there was no demoralising campaign of the kind going on? One has never seen that stated by either his supporters or his opponents.

CHAPTER XII

ARRAS 1917

(By J. H. B.)

THERE is something almost meteoric about the British attack east of Arras in April 1917. It stands out by itself in the composite picture of the year as an isolated feature of great brilliance, yet with a disappointing suggestion of the unfinished. Suddenly, and while the attention of the world at large was still occupied with discussions of the causes and significance of the German Retreat, there came the announcement of a great British victory at the very hinge of the already famous Hindenburg Line, with a tale of prisoners and captured guns till then unparalleled on the Western Front. Next, after a short month of fighting gradually decreasing in violence, the episode ends, leaving the world and Ludendorff to wonder whether it had really had any strategic object at all.

The reason why the battle took place in the form it did has already been discussed at length in a preceding chapter. It represented all that was left of Joffre's original scheme for the resumption of a joint Allied offensive on the Somme, in which the British, having wiped out the Ancre salient and broken the German line east of Arras, would operate by a south-eastward turning movement towards Cambrai in support of and in co-operation with a French attack on our immediate right. The French half of that scheme had been swept away by the German withdrawal. Haig's foresight in including the Vimy Ridge in the area of his attack had saved his battle preparations from the fate that had befallen those of the French, but by the substitution of Nivelle's plan for Joffre's his place in the Allied scheme of operations

had been reduced from that of an equal partner to that of a subordinate assistant. The strategic importance of the Arras battle was accordingly almost entirely dependent upon the French operations on the Aisne, and was from the start less immediate in its effect on the general situation, owing to the distance separating the two Allied attacks. When the French operations failed, the Arras battle was left largely in the air and had to be either abandoned altogether or given a strategic objective of a wholly new character. For reasons which will be discussed later in this chapter, it was decided not to go on, and with this decision the strategic interest of the Arras battle disappeared. The part which the British Army was intended to play in the exploitation of the French victory on the Aisne, had that victory materialised, has already been referred to and need not be dealt with further. All that requires to be said here is that by its attack of April 9 and following days the British Army carried out the first part of the task allotted to it with a completeness and success that at once delighted and surprised¹ the French. They drew from the British victory the happiest auguries for their own venture, without precisely weighing the complete contrast in method employed in the one case and in the other, nor yet the even more striking difference in the temper of the troops engaged.

If, however, in the event which happened there is a noteworthy absence of strategic interest in the Arras offensive, there is a wealth of tactical interest in the manner in which it was fought on both sides. The subject is perhaps one to be approached with caution by any one other than a professional soldier; but with that note of warning and apology it may yet be possible usefully to draw attention to certain of the more obvious points, and to advance, if only for the purpose of stimulating criticism, certain of the conclusions formed at the time as the result of a close study of the battle.

There is, at the outset, an obvious contrast between the

¹ The comment of French officers who had visited our armies prior to the battle to study our plans is believed to have been the reverse of complimentary.

overwhelming success at all points of the initial assault east of Arras and the comparatively limited inroad into the enemy's positions on a part only of the front attacked effected on July 1, 1916. To what causes should this difference be attributed? It is clear that a deteriorated moral on the part of the enemy cannot have been the determining factor, else the French attack on the Aisne would have met with better fortune. There is little doubt that the long period of quiet on the French front had given the enemy time to rest his troops and accumulate reserves of material, and that, further, the unhindered withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, combined with skilful German propaganda, had largely restored the confidence of the German rank and file both in their commanders and themselves. Neither were the German defences at Arras less formidable. On the southern portion of the front attacked the enemy awaited our assault in a part of the Hindenburg Line itself, that is to say, in the latest development in modern field defences constructed to embody the lessons of the Somme battle. The northern sector was defended by the Vimy Ridge, perhaps the most formidable defensive position in Northern France and one which our Allies had in vain endeavoured to capture. The centre was composed of old-established lines strengthened by a number of fortified villages, and with the marshes of the Scarpe to break up the attack. So far as defences were concerned there was little if anything to choose between the Somme and Arras; but there was this difference in the task of the attacker, namely, that while between the Somme and the Ancre the British onslaught was launched against the two flanks of a German salient, the assault of April 9, 1917, was delivered frontally.

The explanation of our success, therefore, must evidently be sought on our side of the line. It will be found, as might be expected, in the combination of a number of factors. First must be put the greater experience of our troops, the beneficial effect of which was already showing itself in the later stages of the Somme, and had since been greatly stimulated by the training which, despite interference caused

by the extension of our front, the disturbing effect of the Retreat and the demands of the preparations for our offensive, the insistence of the British Commander-in-Chief had succeeded in carrying out. Nowhere on April 9 does the mistake appear to have been made of overrunning German dugouts or strong points without making adequate arrangements to deal with their occupants. It has been seen that long before the close of the Somme battle our infantry and artillery had learned to work in almost perfect unison, and once the infantry under cover of the barrage had entered the enemy's positions the German garrisons were either killed or captured. Second only to this greater skill in the art of fighting was the influence of the greater resources in men and material possessed by the British Army in April 1917 as compared with July 1916. In bayonet and sabre strength alone we were over 100,000 stronger, but more important even than that, for, as will be seen later, only a portion of our numerical strength was committed to the Arras fight, was the increase in the number of our guns and the quantity and quality of our ammunition.

The change in the artillery situation in 1916 and 1917 was remarkable. In 1916 the greatest care and economy had to be exercised lest our guns should be left without ammunition to fire. In 1917 we had during a great part of the year enough ammunition in Franco to destroy all our guns, and an equal vigilance had to be maintained lest pieces should be worn out more rapidly than they could be replaced. If it had not been found by experience that the life of guns and especially of howitzers was much greater than had been commonly supposed, and had it not been, too, for the zeal and skill of our ordnance services in repairing damaged pieces, the gun situation in 1917 would have caused as much anxiety as the shell situation had done in the previous year. The net result, however, was a great gain, and the effect upon the battle of a substantial improvement of the position as regards guns and of an enormous improvement as regards ammunition can best be understood by a single comparison. The front of our attack on July 1, 1916, extended over some

27,000 yards and the number of guns employed was just under 1750. On this front this number of guns fired in the course of a preliminary bombardment lasting 8 days, including the day of the attack, just over 52,000 tons of ammunition. The front of the Arras attack was some 25,000 yards, and the preliminary bombardment, again including the day of assault, lasted 6 days. In this shorter time, and on this reduced front, 2880 guns fired nearly 88,000 tons of ammunition. Those facts alone go a long way to explain the difference in the results achieved in these two attacks.

It was not merely in quantity of ammunition that the improvement was shown. The quality had also changed greatly for the better. One of the most striking features of the Somme battlefield was the great number of British shells, chiefly of large calibre, that had failed to explode and could be seen lying about in all directions. Though in some cases the nature of the ground may have had something to do with this large proportion of 'duds,' and faulty gun construction was probably responsible in others, the chief cause was defects in fuse manufacture which by 1917 had been remedied. Moreover, in addition to greater reliability in the ordinary percussion fuse, a new type of instantaneous fuse was now being introduced for the first time, the '106' fuse which burst immediately upon contact with the ground and before the body of the shell had had time to bury itself. At the date of the Arras battle this new fuse was not available in very large quantities, but it was already evident that it was destined to have a definite effect upon battle tactics. Apart from possessing much greater man-killing power in the open, shells furnished with the '106' fuse were remarkably effective in destroying wire entanglements. Work which previously had to be done somewhat laboriously and obviously by short-ranged shrapnel fire or trench mortars could with the new fuse be carried out rapidly at longer range by either guns or howitzers. The result was that there was no longer the same need to give the enemy the long warning of impending attack which was unavoidable

when low-burst shrapnel was the chief agent for cutting wire.

Partly on account of this innovation, and also because of the success that in the Ancre fighting had attended surprise attacks launched after heavy general shelling but without special artillery preparation, the drawing up of the artillery programme for the Arras battle was attended by considerable discussion regarding the relative merits of attacks prepared by prolonged preliminary bombardment on the one hand, and on the other those launched immediately after a comparatively short period of very intense fire. In fact, the surprise tactics of a later stage of the war were already being foreshadowed ; but for the moment, in view of the shortage of ' 106 ' fuse and lack of experience in its use, it was ultimately decided to abide in principle by the old practice. The possibilities of the tank as a destroyer of wire were already recognised ; but the machine was not yet sufficiently perfect, the co-operation of infantry and tanks was not yet sufficiently worked out, and the numbers of the tanks were not yet large enough for this means of overcoming wire to be relied upon.

None the less, the tanks formed another special factor which contributed to the success of the Arras battle. The ground of the battle area, south of the Scarpe especially, was much better suited to the effective use of tanks than the shell-riven ridges of the Somme had been, and, as stated in the despatch, tanks performed very valuable service on April 9 in helping to reduce German strong points, such as Telegraph Hill, the Harp, and Railway Triangle. The influence of tanks at this stage, however, should not be exaggerated. The tanks themselves were still very slow, particularly at turning, and, while bullet-proof in the ordinary way, it was found in practice that when subjected to heavy fire from rifles or machine guns the crew were frequently wounded by ' splashes ' from bullets which struck interstices between the plates and, though unable to penetrate in bullet form, projected particles of lead with great velocity into the interior of the machine, or by scales of metal which flew off

from the inner surface of the protective plates under the impact of bullets on the outer surface. The armour of these early tanks was not in any case proof against the special armour-piercing bullets which the enemy soon began to make use of to stop their attacks. The employment of tanks had also another drawback of a different kind which it took some time and training to remedy. Infantry assisted by tanks had a strong and very natural tendency to bunch together in the neighbourhood of the tanks, thus breaking the alignment of the attack. The tanks themselves normally drew heavy fire from the enemy artillery as soon as seen, with the result that the infantry collected round them suffered many casualties. This disadvantage, coupled with the fact that the early tanks themselves often broke down mechanically when most needed, for a time brought the new arm into a very real unpopularity among certain divisions and commanders. It was not until battle experience had effected many improvements in the machine, and experience and training combined had worked out a proper system of combined infantry and tank tactics, that this unpopularity was done away with and the reputation of the tank as a highly efficient instrument of war firmly established.

Besides the tank and the '100' fuso, yet another new form of offensive weapon was used in this attack, and, though capable of less general application, it proved within its limits to be very effective and was employed during the remainder of the year on an increasing scale. This was the projector, a device whereby cylinders of gas, instead of being placed in the front trenches and saps and there turned on when the wind was coming from a quarter that would carry the escaping gas from our trenches to the enemy's, were hurled bodily across no-man's-land into the midst of the enemy's trench system. A small charge of explosive at the base of a lightly constructed tube was found sufficient to project the gas cylinder slowly through the air for a considerable distance, and by firing the charges electrically it was found possible to project several hundred cylinders simultaneously. The advantages were twofold. In the first place, the

method was a much safer one for our troops and could be used in a wider range of winds, because there was less likelihood of the gas flowing back over our trenches. Secondly, the enemy was far more likely to be taken by surprise and caught before he could put on his masks, for there was no warning cloud of gas travelling towards his lines to give the alarm to his sentinels. Unless the actual discharge of the cylinders were seen, the first notice he got of the attack was the presence of the gas in his own trenches. Later in the year our Intelligence Service obtained documentary proof of the high percentage of casualties inflicted on the enemy by these projector discharges. A total of forty tons of gas was discharged in preparation for this battle.

To these various factors making for success may be added another of a different kind. In spite of the comparatively long preparatory bombardment, itself preceded by wire cutting and harassing fire commenced many days earlier, there was an element of surprise about the Arras attack, probably due in part to the novelty of launching a big offensive operation from a town. The very causes which most make for the prosperity and importance of a town in peace, in war tend to make it a place to be avoided if it is within reach of the enemy's artillery. Upon an important place like Arras all roads and railways converge, and the town itself represents a point through which everything moving from west to east along the Scarpe valley must necessarily pass. It becomes, in military language, a defile, and is a natural target for the enemy's artillery and bombing squadrons. On the other hand, no one who has not seen it can appreciate the enormous area of ground commonly covered by the concentration of troops for a big offensive, especially in an army where the health and comfort of the rank and file is a first consideration.¹ To collect a great

¹ Men who have had experience of this 'health and comfort' may perhaps be inclined to scoff at this qualification; but everything is relative. The German dispositions before the battle of March 1918 show a density of concentration far in excess of anything attempted on the British side during the war, and could only have been achieved at the expense of the comfort of the troops.

mass of men, animals, guns and transport in and behind Arras, to attempt to pass them through the narrow streets of the town during the critical hours prior to the assault, and later to endeavour to maintain a constant stream of reinforcements, ammunition, and supplies through the same obvious mark for the enemy's guns and aeroplanes might well have seemed at first sight to be asking for disaster.

The decision, therefore, to launch the offensive from Arras and risk a considerable part of the attack being caught under the enemy's fire in the act of debouching was a tactical innovation of considerable boldness, one that ran contrary to commonly accepted doctrine. There were, however, both general and special arguments in its favour, which were held to outweigh those by which hitherto such manoeuvres had been condemned. In the first place, when the matter was examined more closely, a town of any size was found to contain an enormous amount of cover, not merely from view but from fire. In fact, a town was the only type of locality where large numbers of men could be concentrated in comparative safety from all but the heaviest shells and without the risk of the enemy discovering that the usual garrison had been augmented. It will be remembered that this was before the days of mustard gas. If, therefore, a way could be found to minimise the risk that the troops might be caught by the enemy's guns at the very moment when they were moving out of the confined spaces of the town to take up their positions for the assault, the very fact that the launching of a big offensive from a town was usually considered a thing not to be done might prove to be an advantage to the attackers and lead to the enemy being taken by surprise. That was the general argument in favour of the new manoeuvre, and the special one was furnished by a peculiarity of the town itself. Beneath the streets and houses of Arras is a great system of caves and tunnels, some of them used for domestic purposes of storage, others formerly as sewers, or for purposes even more obscure and doubtful. The essential fact was that they existed, and that their presence solved the difficulty of ensuring that the

bulk of our attacking troops should move out of the town safely, despite the enemy's guns, to their positions of assault. During the winter months these caves and tunnels had been surveyed and cleared, connections had been made between them, and exits on the eastern outskirts of the town opened up, electric light had been installed and the whole system made habitable. In conjunction with the cellars normally attached to the houses in this district, they afforded safe shelter to a very large number of troops and a secure means of passing through, or rather under, those parts of the town most likely to be shelled.

The period immediately preceding the assault, when the whole town of Arras was full of troops, was a time of considerable anxiety; but nothing untoward happened. The German artillery made little effort to shell the town, and the powerful infantry attack that burst upon his lines east of the town at 5.30 A.M. on April 9 would appear to have been the first warning the enemy received of the great mass of British troops concentrated so closely in front of his positions. There is a distinct and most interesting comparison to be drawn between the British tactics on this day and those employed by the enemy at St. Quentin on March 21, 1918. Then also a highly concentrated infantry attack was launched from the cover of a town, and though on that occasion we knew the attack was coming and had bombarded St. Quentin with gas and high explosive, not merely did our bombardment wholly fail to disorganise the attack, but the assault when it came was delivered in an overpowering strength that took us completely by surprise.¹ Whether a town will ever be able to be so used again, now that mustard gas has become a part of an army's ordinary equipment, is an interesting speculation. The experience of the 34th Division at Armentières in April 1918, when the Germans so drenched that town with gas that it was reported at the time that it would be days before even a German could live in it, suggests

¹ The attack itself was no surprise, for definite information had been received of it; the unexpected element was the strength the enemy developed.

a possible answer ; but in any event the lesson of Arras and St. Quentin would seem to be the same, that a big town close in front of one's position is a peculiar element of danger.

The tactical scheme of the attack of April 9, though doubtless influenced to some extent by the methods of Nivelle's attacks at Verdun—a party of British officers had paid a visit to the Verdun front during the winter expressly to study those attacks—did not differ very materially, save in one respect, from the form of attack developed on the Somme. The advance was to proceed by stages, and the troops were given a series of objectives, corresponding with the principal German defence lines, which were to be taken and consolidated successively, ample time being given for each objective to be secured and the troops organised for the next advance. The principal features to be gained were, south of the Scarpe, Monchy-le-Proux hill which stands like a sentinel guarding the eastern approaches to Arras, and north of the river, the Vimy Ridge, the last of the high ground overlooking the Flanders plain. The final objectives for the day included the German third line astride the Scarpe, and it was hoped that the rupture of this line would enable the advance to be developed into open fighting in which cavalry could play a decisive part. Once the third line had been passed, the only prepared line of defence remaining to the enemy was the Drocourt-Quéant line, some six miles farther east, and this line though laid out was not yet complete. Success would turn the Hindenburg Line from the north, and enable an advance to be made on Cambrai on much the same lines as were actually realised some eighteen months later ; but on this occasion the thrust of the Third and First Armies could look for no support on their right comparable with that given by the Fourth Army in 1918, and the French attack on the Aisne would have to go very far indeed before it could make its influence felt on the course of the British operations.

The British attack, therefore, was another example of the methodical advance with limited objectives that was the basis of the wearing-out battle, and once more, as on the

Somme, the drawing of as many German divisions as possible to its own front was at least as important as the gaining of ground. As has been said, however, there was one interesting and important particular in which this attack differed from all other British attacks that had preceded it. This was the employment of 'leap-frogging' divisions in order to carry the advance farther forward. In earlier attacks it had been the practice to divide the successive objectives among the different units composing the attacking division, so that when one or more objectives had been secured by certain units, other units could pass through them to the attack of more distant positions. In the Arras battle, the same method was applied, somewhat tentatively, to whole divisions. Two divisions, the 37th and the 4th, were detailed to follow up the 12th, 15th, and 9th Divisions which delivered the opening assault on either side of the Scarpe and, when the 12th, 15th, and 9th Divisions had reached certain positions, were directed to pass through them and carry on the attack against more distant objectives. To carry out such a manœuvre without confusion required very careful organisation on the part of the staffs concerned, and a high degree of training and discipline on the part of the troops. In the Arras battle it was so far successful that it became the accepted practice in all future attacks in which it was desired to push the advance to the greatest possible depth. We shall see the method employed with complete success in the Messines attack and in a much more limited degree in the third Battle of Ypres. It reached its highest development so far as the British Army is concerned in the battles of the great advance of the summer and autumn of 1918.

The central attack, where the leap-frogging took place, is perhaps the most interesting feature of the Arras battle. It was here that the deepest penetration took place, as was indeed intended, and it was here that the attempt was made to pass cavalry through the gap which the five infantry divisions were thought to have made. The story of the capture of the Vimy Ridge is one of perfect organisation for

an attack, every detail of which had been foreseen and prepared for, carried out by very highly trained troops composed of the finest material. It must ever remain one of the proudest achievements of the Canadian Corps, then commanded by General Byng, and of that main buttress of the British Army in France, Horne's First Army.

The fighting on the southern portion of the battle front showed the influence of the German withdrawal. The attack had had to be reorganised in haste and formed in a new direction. To bring railheads forward and to make new roads over ground systematically devastated took time. New positions had to be found for batteries, dumps moved forward and guns registered on new targets. Even so, most of our guns were firing at unduly long range. There were no close billets for troops, our own trench lines had to be established and our positions advanced gradually so as to narrow down an unusually wide no-man's-land. In these and a thousand other minor ways the attack was handicapped, and though on April 9 our assault was successful, these various disadvantages made themselves felt increasingly in the later stages of the battle in this area.

It is in the centre, then, where an experiment was being carried out, that the interest chiefly lies, and it was here, too, that the question was fought out whether in these first few days the battle was to develop into something more than a brilliant but local tactical success. Whatever prospect there was of giving the battle a wider significance, even independently of the French, lay in the possibility of getting right through the German defences astride the Scarpe and then developing a turning movement south-east behind the Hindenburg Line. For a short time it looked as though this might be achieved. In the area of the 9th and 4th Divisions north of the Scarpe the battle went forward almost without a hitch. The 9th Division successfully achieved their three objectives, and the 4th Division, that had been moving up behind them, then passed through and made an effective breach in the last German defensive line at Fampoux. Though the line of our advance bent back sharply to the

north of them they held their ground and, had the attack on the south bank of the Scarpe proved equally successful, the enemy would have had great difficulty in preventing a serious widening of the gap. Unfortunately, south of the Scarpe matters had not proceeded quite so well, and German machine guns on Monchy-le-Preux hill were able to assist the enemy's reserves north of the river to hold up the attack there.

South of the Scarpe the assault of the 15th Division rapidly overran the foremost German trenches, and at 9.15 A.M. the 37th Division, then halted in three columns on the western outskirts of Arras, received orders to move *forward through the town and assemble in the old British front line system*. This move of about two miles was completed by 11.30 A.M., and half an hour later the division was ordered to continue its advance as far as our first objectives for the day, that is to say, the enemy's front line trench system. The 15th Division, however, had met with very stubborn resistance at a locality known as Railway Triangle, where at a point about half a mile within the German lines the Arras-Lens and Arras-Douai railways meet. The cuttings and embankments of this junction formed a defensive position of great strength which was not completely overcome until after midday. This check not merely held up the 37th Division, but seriously delayed the progress of the artillery detailed to move forward with our advance to positions from which it could cut the wire covering the enemy's third line system—the Wancourt-Feuchy line. At 3 P.M., that is to say about an hour after the 37th Division had taken up its positions in the first German trench system, the situation had so far improved that a further advance could be ordered, the 11th Infantry Brigade, with the 63rd Infantry Brigade following it, being directed to move forward in support of the 15th Division, and the 112th Infantry Brigade in support of the 12th Division which was attacking on the 15th Division's right. Early in the afternoon the Cavalry Corps was also ordered to advance, and the 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions were

sent forward. Chapel Work and Church Work, two strong points in the third line system on the Arras-Cambrai road at Feuchy Chapel, were taken by the 12th Division at 4 p.m. or soon after, and the 15th Division having by this time completed the capture of the German second line system and gone forward, the 37th Division was ordered to prepare to cross at 7 p.m. the sector of the third line system lying between Feuchy Chapel and the Scarpe just east of Feuchy village, and advance on Monchy-le-Preux. At 5.30 p.m. when this order was given the 112th and 111th Brigades were about 1000 yards west of the German third line and advancing towards it, that is they were rather more than one and a half miles east of the old German front line.

About an hour later the 15th Division was reported to have taken the German third line on their front and the way seemed open for the 37th Division to continue the advance to our final objectives for the day at Monchy. The report, however, proved to be incorrect. As the 111th Brigade approached the third line positions in artillery formation it came under machine-gun fire and, though the leading troops immediately extended into formation for attack and pushed on as far as the road leading from Feuchy Chapel to Feuchy, they were there compelled to dig in. Meanwhile the 112th Brigade had found the 12th Division similarly arrested on the line of the road leading south from Feuchy Chapel, and itself had been unable to make further progress. Our infantry, dug in close up to the German third line, could see that the wire in front of it was quite uncut, and there was no way of silencing the enemy's machine guns. The full effects of the unfortunate delay in getting our artillery forward were now felt. Without proper artillery preparation, no assault on the German line could be made. Though after dark there was a gallant effort to bomb a way along a communication trench north of Feuchy Chapel, the East Lancashire troops who made the attempt were driven back after they had actually got through the German wire. Immediately south of the Scarpe some of our mounted troops did succeed in pushing along between

the railway and the river to a point some three-quarters of a mile east of the German third line, and there established touch with our troops in Fampoux. One squadron, indeed, crossed to the south of the railway and captured prisoners and six guns; but the holding up of our infantry attack before the rupture of the enemy's prepared lines of defence had been completed robbed us of the opportunity which it was hoped might have arisen for a more extended use of mounted troops.

Our failure to effect the capture of our full objectives south of the Scarpe would not appear to have been the fault, however, of the novel tactics employed by us. North of the river the leap-frogging of the 9th and 4th Divisions had broken a way through all three of the enemy's systems of defence and established a till then unexampled depth of advance, amounting to not far short of four miles. Had the 12th, 15th, and 37th Divisions met with equal good fortune, the capture of Monchy-le-Preux hill would have opened a wide area for exploitation on both banks of the Scarpe. In that event it is not improbable that by rapid action on our part the enemy could have been prevented from reconstituting his defence before he had been forced back to the half-completed Drocourt-Quéant line. This is a possibility which must be borne in mind whenever the question of the employment of cavalry in the Arras battle is considered. It was a possibility which did not fall far short of realisation, and if it were realised it was obvious that in order to seize it promptly the cavalry would have to be well forward. As will be seen, even on the second day of the battle it did not seem to the local commanders that the chance had wholly gone. In any event, the incident which in fact prevented this opportunity from arising was one independent of the special tactics employed, while on the other hand the presence of a new division in front line on the Monchy-le-Preux sector at the end of the day's fighting enabled us during the night to take full advantage of the gains we had actually made.

In the course of the night, then, the situation arising from

the fact that between the Arras-Douai railway and the river we were already across the German third line was developed by bombing southwards down the trench line itself, until a mile of the system was in our hands and our troops had pushed forward to the crest of Orange Hill, well to the east of the third line system. During the morning of April 10 the 63rd Brigade continued to make ground in this area, till at some time before 10.45 A.M. a company of Somerset Light Infantry had reached the enclosures at the west end of Monchy-le-Preux hill. Soon afterwards Somerset Light Infantry and the 8th Bn. Lincolnshire Regiment were seen approaching the north-west outskirts of Monchy village, and the position on the 37th Division front seemed so favourable that a report was sent to the Vth Corps that an opening for cavalry appeared to exist. At midday the 12th Division renewed its attack on the German third line system on its front, and in combination with the three Brigades of the 37th Division our line was pushed forward to within about 500 yards of Monchy village. Our guns, however, were still too far back to give our infantry the support they needed. First the original check at Railway Triangle had made them late in getting forward to support the attack on the German third line, and then the necessity of dealing with the third line system prevented them from giving proper support to the Monchy attack. It is fair to add that the difficulties of our troops in general and of the artillery in particular were greatly increased on this and the succeeding days by a succession of violent snowstorms, last legacy of a bitter winter, which blew in the faces of our troops, impeding observation of fire and hindering all movement, especially of transport and heavy guns. So far, therefore, from there being an opening for cavalry, by 5 P.M. the whole advance had been brought to a standstill. Meanwhile the 3rd Cavalry Division had attempted to push forward in the direction of Greenland Hill, eastwards of Fampoux, and uncertainty as to its exact position hindered the work of the Vth and XVIIth Corps heavy artillery in dealing with German batteries which from that area were bringing a

heavy fire to bear upon our troops south of the Scarpe. In this latter sector troops of the 6th Cavalry Brigade filled a gap in our infantry line opposite Guémappe, doing useful work dismounted, as the 3rd Dragoon Guards, the 10th Hussars and the Essex Yeomanry did on the following day in the defence of Monchy-le-Preux.

When the attack was resumed in this area at 5 A.M. on the morning of April 11, the 15th Division had come up on the left of the 37th, the 12th Division had been withdrawn into support, and the 3rd Division were in line immediately on the right of the 37th. The artillery had been on the move during the preceding night when the orders for the attack were given, and were late in opening fire, so long does the effect of an early misfortune persist; but the arrival of four tanks at 5.30 A.M. greatly assisted the battalion of the 111th Brigade attacking Monchy, and by 9 A.M. the whole of the village was in our hands. Attempts to push forward between Monchy and the Scarpe were met by machine-gun fire from the opposite bank, about Roeux, and the 3rd Division found the enemy in Guémappe too strong to be dislodged. The day ended, therefore, with Monchy-le-Preux held as a pronounced salient in our lines. A most interesting experiment in battle tactics had been carried through with a degree of success sufficient to establish the new method as a valuable aid to the offensive.

Before leaving this phase of the offensive, reference must be made to an attempt made on this day, April 11, to develop the battle in a new sector. From the opening of the assault on April 9, the weakest spot in our attack had been, for reasons already referred to, the right flank. The front of our advance here was crossed diagonally by the rivers Cojeul and Sensée, with the villages of Héninel, Wancourt, and Guémappe lying in the valley of the former. Our final objectives for the attack included these three villages and a part of the dividing ridge between the Cojeul and the Sensée; but our advance had fallen a good way short of these objectives, and at the end of the second day the enemy still held all three villages. Our battle plan for this sector

included a proposal to assist the break-through at Monchy and subsequent turning movement southwards from that village by an attack by the Fifth Army northwards east of the Sensée, which in conjunction with the eastward progress of the Third Army's right might cut off a part of the German forces in the Sensée valley. The progress made on the 9th and 10th, though not so great as had been hoped, had undeniably been very considerable, and it was thought that simultaneous attacks on April 11 by the Third Army eastwards and the Fifth Army northwards across the Hindenburg Line about Bullecourt might yet achieve the desired result. Accordingly, at 4.30 A.M. on this day the 4th Australian Division preceded by eleven tanks attacked on a front of about a mile from west of Bullecourt eastwards. At the same time the Third Army strove to get forward across the Cojeul to meet this attack and co-operate with it.

The Australian assault, delivered with great dash and courage, went ahead rapidly, though heavy snow fell throughout the day, and weather conditions, whether for infantry or tanks, could scarcely have been worse. Early reports were most encouraging, and for a short time it was believed that Bullecourt, Rencourt-lez-Cagnicourt and Hendecourt were in our hands. With Wancourt and Guémappe taken by the Third Army the whole German position between was seriously threatened, and so bright was the outlook that a brigade of cavalry was sent forward to be ready to cross the Hindenburg Line and push forward in the direction of Fontaine-lez-Croisilles and Chérisy. Early reports, however, were succeeded by others that put a different complexion upon affairs. The Third Army was unable to cross the Cojeul river, or to turn the enemy permanently out of Héninel, Wancourt or Guémappe. The hope of pinching off a part of the German front was therefore gone, and it was soon apparent that the Australian attack was also in difficulties. The scheme of the attack, a deep thrust on a narrow front with the tanks to open the way and give momentum—Cambrai in miniature—perhaps asked too much of both men and machines at this stage of their

training and development. The Fifth Army operation, moreover, was on too small a scale to achieve substantial success unless the main Third Army got on. The failure of the latter sealed the fate of the Bullecourt attack. The tanks were put out of action one after another, while from the deep tunnelled dugouts of the Hindenburg Line the enemy poured up in unexpected numbers. Finally, at about midday our troops in Bullecourt were heavily counter-attacked from both flanks and driven back to the railway south of the village.

Héninel and Wancourt were captured on the afternoon of the 12th, together with part of the high ground and some 2000 yards of the Hindenburg Line east of the Cojeul river, but by this time all hope of a rapid exploitation of our opening success on the Third Army front had vanished, and the cavalry was accordingly withdrawn west of Arras. Though north of the Scarpe the enemy was beginning to fall back from the ground immediately dominated by the Vimy Ridge, a movement which continued until the defences known as the Oppy-Méricourt-Vendin line were reached, the larger interest of the Arras battle had really ended. The enemy had had time to throw in new divisions and re-constitute his battle line. While the speed with which the defences of the Drocourt-Quéant line were being hurried on to completion was an index of the anxiety felt by the enemy for the safety of his front, the stage had been reached when local exploitation would have to be followed by another major operation if the battle was to be carried further. What was to be the British policy in this matter? It has been seen that the motive of the battle was to use up German reserves, and draw guns and material away from the main French battle on the Aisne. That had been admirably achieved. A big gap had been driven through an old established sector of the German front, and, as Ludendorff says, it had been no light work to patch it up again. Already 13,000 prisoners and 200 guns had been taken by us. Meanwhile, the great French attack, due on April 12, had been postponed. Instead of the French blow falling while the

enemy was still reeling from the effects of the British stroke, the enemy was being given time to pull himself together, to calculate chances and risks and readjust his dispositions. It was clear that there would have to be at least one other big British attack, and that meanwhile it was policy to maintain as much activity as possible. Attacks at Rosoux on April 12, on Wancourt Tower on the 13th, by the VIIth and VIth Corps astride the Cojeul river on the 14th, apart from the operations of the First Army in the Lens sector and of the Fourth Army in the St. Quentin and Havrincourt sectors, maintained the activity of the British front till the eve of the French onslaught.

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Within a comparatively few hours of the launching of Nivelle's great attack on April 16, it was known that whatever the ultimate outcome of the battle it had failed in its main object. The enemy had precise knowledge that the attack was coming and of what it was intended to achieve. The French artillery was inadequate to the tremendous task assigned to it, and the French infantry was conscious that they were being asked to perform the impossible. Though here and there the French bit deeply into the German positions and took many prisoners and guns, there was nothing even to suggest the rapid onrush that had figured so largely in Nivelle's programme of the battle. On the other hand, to stop the battle at once was to admit failure and defeat, and certainly there was no military need to do so. The results achieved, had they been the first-fruits of a new wearing-out battle, would have been not merely respectable, but even encouraging. It was the contrast with what France and the Allies had been led to expect that made the picture of the first day's fighting seem so black. So matters appeared to the British, even though at that time all but the very clear-sighted or the unusually well-informed believed, as they were told, that the French losses were twice as great as they in fact had been. The natural British answer, therefore, when the question came to be asked what was to be done, was 'Let us go on.' On

the Aisne and at Arras great battles had been mounted. Railways and roads had been built, and men, guns, and material had been got together in great masses. Long-established German positions had been breached, and the enemy was being forced to waste time, men, and material in constructing for himself new defences under the constant pressure of attack and the fury of our guns. Considered as the opening round of a new wearing-out battle, what had already been accomplished was a great step forward, far greater than anything that 1916 had seen. We had commenced nearly three months earlier in the year, and with such a start and the lasting effects of 1916 on German moral and man-power to aid us, it was hard to think—if Russia remained an effective force for a few months longer—that the combined efforts of the French and British Armies could not come to an end of the German powers of resistance in the west. It was but a change back from Nivelle's ambitious scheme to Joffre's more cautious but more certain plan and the war might yet be finished during the summer of 1917.

To be sure, the two offensives were widely separated, and the Arras battle in particular was somewhat in the air, strategically, until one or other of the attacks had made really deep progress; but they were directed at the two shoulders of the new German line, and in time, if progress was maintained, would turn it. Further tactical successes of no small importance had been in sight at Arras in the first fight and would certainly be achieved ultimately were the offensive persisted in. The same arguments applied on the Laon front, and above all was the overmastering argument that, if we persisted long enough, with the gradual crumbling of the German front and German strength tactical successes would open the way to strategic victory.

One thing, however, was essential, namely, that both the Allied Armies should be prepared to go on with equal resolution. Failing that, better to break off the battle at once; so that the army that was prepared to fight might transfer its efforts at once to a sector where more immediate strategic results might be obtained. If the British were to

continue the struggle unaided, Flanders and not Arras was the obvious sector in which to operate. An advance which would take us from the Vimy Ridge to Douai, in Flanders would take us to Ostende. Douai was scarcely more important to the enemy than Lens, but Ostende stood for the Channel submarine bases, and the submarine was, at this date, Ludendorff's one hope of a victorious German peace. If, however, we were to transfer our attention to Flanders, no time was to be lost ; for a double offensive would have to be mounted at Messines and at Ypres, and the mounting of offensives was at this date a lengthy business. The problem, therefore, resolved itself shortly into this: were the French prepared to fight throughout the summer and to take their share in a new wearing-out battle on the lines that Joffre had forecast for them ? If so, the proper course for both armies was to go on where they had begun and give the enemy no time to recover from the blows he had already received. If the French were not prepared to take this course, the whole scheme of the offensive for which Nivelle was responsible should be brought to an end at once. While French and British endeavoured to give the enemy the impression by continual activity on the old battle fronts that the original offensive was to be persisted in, the British should forthwith undertake their preparations for a Flanders operation. In this latter case, the French, who would have no active rôle to perform elsewhere, might reasonably be expected to engage the enemy's attention on the Laon front by powerful limited attacks.

Though in their opening assaults the French had in fact incurred only about half the casualties suffered by the Fourth British Army in the first week of the Somme, they were not prepared to go on. On the other hand, they were not yet prepared to confess failure, or admit the diminution in their fighting powers. Accordingly, neither of the alternatives above stated was adopted by them ; but Nivelle's battle, of which the Arras operation was a subsidiary and subordinate part, was continued just long enough to make it extremely doubtful whether in the remainder of a short campaigning season

the Flanders operation could be carried through successfully. These circumstances naturally coloured the succeeding stages of the Arras battle. So long as the French sought by tactical successes to atone for their strategic failure, the British, as in duty bound, continued their attacks east of Arras ; but failing an assurance that the French were prepared to go on indefinitely on the lines of a battle of attrition, the British command had to face the fact that at any moment they might be left with the task of carrying on alone the Allied offensive in the west. In view of this possibility, few new divisions were put into the Arras battle, and the attacks of April 23 and 28 and May 3 were planned on wide fronts but with comparatively shallow objectives. The fact did not escape Ludendorff's attention and he was obviously puzzled by it, as indeed by the whole of the Arras offensive. He could not know of the conditions under which the British Commander-in-Chief was conducting his campaign.

When, at the end of April and beginning of May, the question whether the French attack should be continued or not came up in an acute form, valuable time had been lost, and the arguments in favour of continuing on the lines of a wearing-out battle had been strengthened correspondingly ; for by this time it was clear that a Flanders offensive could only be launched perilously late in the season. To shift the battle to the north when summer was already at hand meant gambling on a fine autumn. Though everything possible had been done to advance the Flanders preparations, the needs of the Arras battle necessarily took first place so long as active operations continued there, and the resources of the British Armies were not sufficient to allow the preparations for a second major operation to be undertaken satisfactorily while one such operation was still in progress. The best weeks of fighting weather would therefore be lost in getting ready, first for the capture of the Messines ridge, and then for the offensive east of Ypres ; and meanwhile the enemy would be given a corresponding space of time in which to recover from the effects of the earlier battles. The

very principle of the wearing-out battle would largely be sacrificed at the start. The moral effect of the Somme would be wholly lost in the encouragement that the enemy would draw from the obvious failure of the larger objectives of the Allied spring campaign. It may reasonably be supposed that it was such considerations as these that impelled Sir Douglas Haig to urge up to the eleventh hour that the French should persist in their offensive. With an accurate appreciation of what the French losses had actually been, he no doubt felt that in any event the French Army ought to be able to take its fair share in the fighting during the rest of the year.

If the French were not capable of undertaking such a wearing-out battle as would justify him in continuing the offensive at Arras, at least they should do what they could to draw to the French front as large a part of the German reserves as possible during the British operations in Flanders. However, the utmost he could obtain fell far short of this. For the time being, the fighting spirit had gone from the French Army. All the aid our Allies could promise was the immediate relief of our right on a sector of six miles between St. Quentin and the Omignon river at Pontriuet, with the promise of a later relief over a distance of some fifteen miles to Havrincourt when the British should take over the French sector on the coast at Lombartzyde. Even so, this latter relief was never carried out. In these circumstances, with the knowledge that the French rôle was henceforth to be a passive one, to persist in the Arras offensive was to condemn the year's campaign in advance to sterility. Though the success of the Flanders offensive had by this time become problematical unless the weather favoured us, it was the only plan that gave a hope of effective results.

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Meanwhile, our operations on the Arras front had resulted in substantial advances and the capture of some thousands of prisoners. So far as our task consisted in keeping the enemy fully occupied on our front and in compelling him

to employ there divisions and guns which might otherwise have been available for use against the French, it had been fully and successfully discharged. Twenty-three German divisions were withdrawn exhausted from the Arras battle within the space of one month and had to be replaced by others. The fighting had been heavy at all points, and, after the first day, was remarkable for the weight, frequency, and on the whole, it must be said, the considerable degree of success of the enemy's counter-attacks. It is in this fact, especially, that the chief interest of the later stages of the battle lies, for it betokened a change of method in the enemy's defence. The matter is of sufficient importance to warrant special notice before the story of the Flanders campaign is undertaken, for it is a new move in the unceasing 'battle of tactics,' and had a large influence upon the subsequent fighting of this year.

One of the things most commonly overlooked by critics of the war and of its conduct is the constant and active process of evolution in military methods and ideas which commenced in August 1914, and at the date of the Armistice and after was still hard at work. Reference to one side of this evolutionary process has already been made in the description of the gradual shifting of the burden in the west from French to British shoulders, and the consequent predominance of the British conception of war as figured in the wearing-out battle. That was but one example of a general process that pervaded every phase of the great struggle in the west and influenced each component part of the contending armies.

The conception of G.H.Q. as a body of pre-war, if not prehistoric, soldiers ignorant of the needs and realities of the fighting front and utterly impervious to new ideas is ridiculous to any one whose duties brought him into touch in any degree and in any sphere however humble with life and thought at G.H.Q. Every formation in France, from the platoon and section upwards, had its own particular point of view and saw the war from a different angle. Every formation was seething with ideas, and these ideas, good,

bad and indifferent, came welling upwards. If they did not all reach the top, certainly all that had good in them did so, and some others, and this multitude of suggestions had then to be sifted, clarified, assorted, placed in their proper relation and perspective one to another, and a consistent policy to meet all circumstances evolved from them. Then came the harder task of passing back the results, decisions, that is, comprising a settled practice for each arm, to the lower formations and seeing that they were acted upon. It then became speedily apparent that the conservatism of G.H.Q. was as nothing to the devotion of local commanders to their own way of thinking, their pet theories and individual practices. Each, convinced that the proof of the pudding was in the eating, honestly believed that he, the fighting officer, must know more of the practical side of war than any G.H.Q. theorist; though that theorist had himself been a fighting officer not long since, would probably return to a fighting command in a few months' time, and had evolved the theory in question by weighing and combining the experience and ideas not of one but of great numbers of fighting officers whose views and practices had one thing paramously in common, namely, that they differed from each other more than from the doctrine that G.H.Q. was striving to establish as a settled practice throughout the army.

The incidents of war are so varied and depend upon so many different factors that strong arguments based on experience can often be found for principles wholly contradictory. Hence the difficulty of reconciling divergent views and enforcing a common practice. Moreover, the difficulty is increased by an inherent element of inertia in the rank and file. New methods evolved in war are almost always more skilled methods, demanding a higher degree of training on the part of those carrying them out. Action in the decisive moments of fighting is usually instinctive, and there are comparatively few men so gifted that they can think clearly and quickly in the midst of great emergency. For training to be effective, the lesson instilled

must not merely have been understood, but must have become part and parcel of the individual soldier's mental equipment. It follows that a new form of tactics will readily break down in moments of crisis if the preliminary training has been anything less than complete, and the consequent disaster will often be worse than if older but better known methods had been followed. The result will often be that the fighting soldier will condemn the new idea as impracticable when the real mischief is that it has not been sufficiently deeply instilled into the minds of rank and file. Yet tactics must be kept abreast of changing conditions, and if the best results are to be got from an army, if *there is to be a proper flexibility and resilience among units*, and if the higher command is to be able to count with certainty upon the ability of different units of like formation to accomplish definite and similar tasks, there must be not merely development but uniformity of development in the methods employed throughout the whole Army. Perhaps the greatest problem of the recent war was to make training keep pace with invention, and the problem was peculiarly difficult of solution in the British Army because of the entire absence of pre-war training among the mass of the troops, and because the demands of the battle front at all periods of the war left so little time for training behind the line. With so much to be done and so short a space of time available for training, there was always present the tendency to concentrate unduly upon some particular form of fighting, to the exclusion of others not less important to the full equipment of a fighting man. Without greatly straining truth, it may be said that the first half of the war was devoted to training riflemen to throw bombs, and the second half was spent in teaching bombers to shoot.

The difficulties experienced by the British in matters of training and the development of tactics were common in greater or less degree to all armies, not excluding those of our enemies. Though undoubtedly greatly helped in matters of training by the possession of a large pre-war army and a big staff of instructors, the Germans like ourselves had found

that a novel type of warfare gave rise to fresh tactical needs and that the continual appearance of new weapons demanded the constant modification both of training and of tactics. Quick-firing artillery and machine guns drove men underground, and wire, deep dugouts, and the multiplication of trenches gave an air of permanency to the battle lines. This was the first stage, in which the rifle was at a big discount, and bombs and trench mortars the order of the day. More numerous and heavier artillery was answered by thicker wire and deeper dugouts. The violent frontal assaults which at great sacrifice of life strove in 1915 to burst through the defensive line originally taken up were replied to by the multiplication of reserve lines; till behind the front line system on either side there stretched a second, third, and even fourth system of trenches, each covered by its protecting screens of wire. Throughout this period, however, it was the practice on either side to hold the front system in strength. It was here that the main battle was fought, and the fury of the attack broken. It was believed and found by experience that even if the first system were overwhelmed, its capture could only be achieved at great cost to the attackers, whose further progress could then easily be arrested by the reserves in the further defence systems. Defence tactics in battle under such conditions consisted chiefly in a thorough knowledge of the intricate maze of trenches forming the defence system, and in the quick carrying up of machine guns from dugouts directly the bombardment ceased, so that the guns could be mounted and fire opened on the enemy before the attacking waves could reach the parapet. Or, if that was impossible owing to the narrowness of no-man's-land and the speed with which the attack followed the bombardment, then in breaking out of the dugouts by unguarded exits after the first attackers had passed over, cutting them off from their supports. A report of our attack on Gommecourt on July 1, 1916, written by the German division defending that place, affords astonishing evidence of the almost complete security afforded by deep dugouts against artillery bombardment at that period

and of the success of the methods of defence then employed.

Yet actually on July 1, 1916, the reply to this method of defence was in course of being evolved. It consisted in the combination of three factors : first, the rolling barrage ; second, the better training of the attacking infantry, who were learning to keep well up to the line of bursting shells and to make quite sure before going on to a further objective that no free Germans were left behind them ; and third, the wearing-out battle. By the first two factors, given a reasonable sufficiency of men and guns, the capture of a definite segment of the enemy's defensive system could be assured. The third factor meant that, given sufficient time, the process would be repeated until the whole series of successive belts of old and new defences was pierced and the moral of the defending infantry broken in the process.

This was the lesson of the Somme battle as Ludendorff saw it when he and Hindenburg assumed supreme command and visited the west in September 1916. The fact appears clearly in his published *Memories*. He came rapidly to the conclusion that the German defence tactics were at fault, and set himself at once to remedy them. In the face of the methods of attack then being followed by the Allies, the crowding of more and more Germans into the front lines merely added to the number of casualties and prisoners lost. By reason of the bulk of the units in line being immediately involved in the defence of the first positions, reserves were usually so far back that the Allied infantry had time to consolidate newly captured positions before being called upon to defend them from counter-attack. Bad enough when the defence still held old-established systems well provided with dugouts that gave real protection from fire, such a system of defence was more than ever hopeless in hastily dug trench lines which were daily pounded to pieces by the British and French guns. One of the features of the Somme battle, as compared with later battles, was the large proportion of our own and of the enemy's artillery fire which was directed upon the actual fighting line. In the third

Battle of Ypres, guns fought guns, and the casualties among the artillery personnel were, it is believed, proportionately much higher than the casualties among the infantry in line. On the Somme the reverse was the case, and it was this direct concentration of all arms upon the destruction of the opposing lines of infantry that gave to the fighting its peculiarly bitter character. However, the Allied artillery, thanks largely to Allied supremacy in the air, was dominant, and already when the change took place in the German Higher Command the faulty tactics employed by them had brought the German infantry very near to the breaking-point.

As he tells us in his *Memories*, Ludendorff formed this opinion as soon as he had come to an understanding of the situation in the west. Yet it is not until the later stages of the Arras battle that a change in the method of German defence began to be apparent. It would seem that the conservatism of the junior formations of the German Army was comparable to the conservatism that at times made its influence felt among the lower formations of our own Army. There are passages in Ludendorff's book which suggest that this was so. Certainly, the old-established trench lines east of Arras appear to have been held much in the same way as the similar lines on the Somme. The dugouts were full of troops, and whole battalions were taken in the defences of strong points. Such troubles as were met with in our advance were due less to organised counter-attacks than to the resistance of powerfully defended localities, the incidents of the one initial failure north of the Scarpe—that of Hill 145, which was not taken till the second day of the battle—reminding one strongly of those Somme failures due to the emergence of German troops from underground strongholds. But with the renewal of our offensive on April 23—the bad weather had led to a postponement from the 21st, the original date fixed—our troops found themselves confronted with new conditions.

On this day nine British divisions¹ attacked on a front of

¹ 20th, 33rd, and 50th Divisions, VIIth Corps; 15th, 17th, and 29th, VIth Corps; 37th and 51st, XVIIth Corps; and 63rd, XIIth Corps.

about nine miles from Chérisy on the Sensée to Gavrelle north of the Scarpe, with a view to gaining a succession of shallow objectives. The attack opened well, and the first reports showed our troops going forward rapidly at all points. Then came a check, and from midday onwards violent counter-attacks developed in such force that on the greater part of the front our troops, not yet recovered from the fatigue and natural disorganisation resulting from their advance, were not merely stopped but driven back. The story of the severe fighting that followed, and of the enemy's ultimate abandonment of the contested ground on the morning of April 24, is told in the official despatch. The special interest of the battle lies in its revelation of a fact not referred to in the despatch, namely, that Ludendorff's influence and teaching had at length effected a revolution in German defence tactics. Forward positions, consisting as they did chiefly of hastily prepared defences exposed to the full force of our bombardment, were no longer held in great strength, but merely by such troops as were deemed sufficient to maintain the continuity of the front before attack and serve to break up and disorganise the attack when it came. The troops economised in this way went to swell the divisional reserves, and were kept in positions secure from the worst effects of our preparatory bombardment and out of reach of our barrages, yet sufficiently close up to be able to counter-attack immediately and with effect before our new line was established. It was the beginning of the system of defence by counter-attack which played so large a part in the fighting east of Ypres later in the year. Undeniably it was an effective counter to our existing methods of attack, and both on this occasion and in the subsequent Arras attacks on April 28 and May 3 greatly limited though it did not wholly prevent our progress.

The nature of these two last-mentioned attacks bears close resemblance to that of the attack of April 23; except that, in view of the general situation on these later dates, the actual gaining of ground was proportionately less necessary, though naturally highly desirable, than the dis-

charging of our obligations to our Allies with as little loss as possible to our own troops. Breadth of attack, therefore, was of greater moment than depth of objectives, and few fresh troops were employed. The assault of April 28 by 7 divisions (12th, 34th, 37th, 63rd, and 2nd Divisions, and 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions) on a front of about 8 miles from Monchy-le-Preux northwards led to another two days of obstinate fighting in which 1000 prisoners were taken by us ; but after having held Roeux and Arleux and made initial progress at most other points all along the battle front, in the end Arleux represented our only substantial gain. The more imposing battle of May 3, delivered by troops of 14 divisions ¹ with an eye to the French attack on the Chemin-des-Dames two days later, extended over a total front of some 16 miles from the Sensée river to the Acheville-Vimy road. In their first assault at 3.45 A.M. the 2nd Australian Division reached their second objective beyond the Hindenburg Line, and the 62nd Division took Bullecourt and a portion of the Hindenburg Line west of the village. Violent counter-attacks drove the Australians back to the Hindenburg Line but could not dislodge them from there, though the enemy made three attempts to do so even before so early an hour as 9.30 A.M. How the hold of this isolated sector of the Hindenburg Line so gallantly established on this day was ultimately secured forms another of those minor incidents of the Great War which it is to be hoped will one day obtain the special treatment warranted by the heroism of which they were the occasion. While the Australians stubbornly held on to the major portion of their gains, other counter-attacks forced the 62nd Division out of Bullecourt with serious loss, so that the 7th Division were sent up to take over from them.

Meanwhile, on the Third Army front the 21st Division at first made no progress, but later reached the Sensée river.

¹ 2nd Australian Division (1st Anzac Corps) and 62nd Division (Vth Corps), Fifth Army ; 14th, 18th, and 21st Divisions (VIIth Corps), 3rd, 12th, and 56th Divisions (VIth Corps), and 4th and 9th Divisions (XVIIth Corps), Third Army ; 2nd and 31st Divisions (XIIIth Corps), and 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions (Canadian Corps), First Army.

The 18th and 14th Divisions took Chérisy and advanced up the rising ground east of the village, but were driven by successive counter-attacks first part of the way and then all the way back to their original lines. Similarly the Vth Corps troops reached St. Rohart Factory close to Vis-en-Artois, pushed out east of Monchy across the knoll known on our trench maps as Infantry Hill and got within a short distance of the village of Pelves; but at the end of the fighting a short advance east of Monchy-le-Preux represented the whole of their permanent gains. The XVIIth Corps took Roeux chemical works, but failed to hold them. The right of the XIIIth Corps could make no progress east of Gavrolle, and on the left gains made in Oppy Wood were lost again to counter-attacks. Only in the Hindenburg Line east of Bullecourt and at Fresnoy, taken by the Canadians, was a substantial advance made and held, and the village of Fresnoy itself was lost five days later by the 5th Division as the result of a new and violent counter-attack. Another thousand prisoners and the knowledge that we were retaining the enemy on our front in relief of the French attack were compensations, if not wholly satisfying ones, for the lack of greater territorial gains.

More serious than the fact that our advance was being held in a battle that had long since realised its chief tactical objectives, and had now reached the end of its period of major activity, was the fact that the Third Army had failed to find a counter to the new German tactics and had, to put it bluntly, on two separate occasions butted its head fruitlessly and somewhat unimaginatively against a brick wall. When the scene shifts to the north, we shall find that the appropriate counter had been discovered.

CHAPTER XIII

THE NIVELLE TRAGEDY: FINAL PHASE

THE Battle of the Aisne was wholly French. No British troops engaged in it. But it has to be recalled, for it affected—profoundly—our campaigns and strategy during the remainder of 1917. That essential truth has been missed in this country. Naturally it has been missed, for nothing has been made known about the battle except that it failed and its originator was removed from his command. The French public has been far better informed, but French writers on this period have not gone out of their way to explain to their readers the task which devolved on the British Army after the close of the fighting on the Aisne. The attitude of these writers towards the British High Command has usually been handsome—to a point. They have gladly acknowledged that Haig stood up for Nivelle and his military supporters with chivalry through the crisis of April and early May 1917; that he strove to give heart and hope to the French Ministers who called him into consultation. Unfortunately at this point their acknowledgments cease. They remember well, and dilate upon, his efforts for Nivelle. But they forget his later and invaluable services to the French nation by engaging the German Army in the west for the rest of the year.¹ For example,

¹ M. Painlevé is in the opposite camp as regards Nivelle. But he too commits the same error in overlooking Haig's immense services to France in 1918 particularly. M. Painlevé is on safe ground when he points out the defects of Nivolle's scheme, and claims that at an early stage he foresaw its weakness. But then he goes on to claim that it was he who appointed Pétain and Foch—and that they were the war-winners. It appears to follow that M. Painlevé was himself the war-winner among statesmen. Unfortunately, in claiming that his own generals won the war, M. Painlevé falls into the error, neither an intelligent nor a generous

one discovers even so excellent a writer as M. Jean de Pierrefeu, in his book already mentioned, at pains to show how, gradually, under Nivelle's successor, the moral of the French Army was restored: 'Notre armée, intacte, en pleine possession de ses moyens . . . avait les meilleurs chances de résister à l'assaut final, quand il se produirait. Hélas ! les Anglais ne pouvaient en dire autant. Ralliés à la politique offensive de Nivelle, ils avaient bousculé l'ennemi tout l'été et une partie de l'automne. Sans parvenir à débloquer la côte belge, ils avaient laissé sur le sol de Flandres vaillamment conquis par eux, 400,000 hommes dont ils n'avaient pas les remplaçants dans leurs dépôts. Crise d'effectifs, crise de cadres, l'armée anglaise, pour des raisons de victoire, traversaient les pénibles moments que nous avons connus au 16 avril, mutineries en moins. De l'aveu de nos amis, l'armée britannique passait par une phase de lassitude et de découragement.' He then proceeds to praise

error, of so many others, which assumed that the genius and rare military skill which brought us victory between August 8 and November were French not British; that these gifts belonged to his generals, not to Haig and his colleagues. M. Painlevé thus overlooks the truth that: (1) It was the British Commander-in-Chief who turned Foch's unscientific plan for a general Allied advance into a scientific plan; (2) it was the British Commander-in-Chief and his Staff and Army Commanders who designed and carried through the whole scheme of British operations which between August 8 and November 11, 1918, broke the German Army at its centre; and that, in carrying out those operations, he had (a) to oppose the vigorous but clumsy proposals for making a frontal attack on the Germans at a point where we should have received a severe check, and finally that he had to decline absolutely to adopt in this matter Foch's proposals or directives, (b) whilst at the same time the British Commander-in-Chief had to proceed with his own skilful and long-thought-out plan of operations in face of miserable discouragement from the War Cabinet here at home.

It is a pity that so clever a statesman as M. Painlevé has not acquainted himself with the facts of 1918.

In 1917 he rightly declined to be led astray by impulse, and would not believe, like his predecessors, in the Nivelle scheme for suddenly crumpling up the German Armies. But, as soon as M. Painlevé reaches 1918, he, too, drops to something like common form and popular claptrap. Not content with the claim—quite just—that he 'spotted' and dismissed a war-loser, he advances the further one that he 'spotted' and appointed the war-winners. That would be over-vision even in the cleverest of politicians.

the sagacity, the caution, of French leadership in the second half of 1917.

Can such a writer be ignorant of the truth that had we, after the failure of the stroke on the Aisne, acted in the manner in which our Allies told us they themselves were forced to act, the Allied cause would have been lost? This French author—who has plenty of official knowledge—probably does not mean to be ungenerous. But the effect of such a statement as he makes is lamentable. He should know that his statement is not only wanting in gratitude—it is entirely inaccurate: M. de Pierrefeu, in recalling March 21, 1918, seems to have forgotten May 27, 1918. He, with his inner knowledge of events at that period, must be aware that the record of French soldiership on that date, including the French Higher Command and Intelligence, to say nothing of the actual fighting of the troops, does not compare by any means well with our own record in connection with the March 21 offensive.

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The general character of the Nivelle offensive has been described. The new French leader had begun to sketch it in outline by December 1916, and to give information to the British Commander-in-Chief and instructions to the commanders of French armies and army groups before the end of the month. In January 1917, in a letter to Micheler, Commander of the group of Fifth, Sixth, and Tenth French Armies, which were to be used on the Aisne front for the rupture and subsequent exploitation, he emphasised the feature 'de violence, de brutalité et de rapidité'—the prime essential of the whole plan, above all of its opening phase—the actual break-through. From this time onward, the plan was constantly being worked up and improved on in regard to the war of movement which would follow the rupture of the enemy's lines, and to the methods which would ensure the very swift and complete success of this opening stroke. The tactical directions to the armies of rupture were minute and multitudinous. The originator of the plan and his Staff and Army Commanders spared no pains in

working up their scheme. They brought to the task all the military experience and ingenuity they could command. The battle—for there was to be only one battle, though, even after the rupture, it might last for a considerable time—would be nothing if not exact and scientific. In fact Nivelle and his Staff were intent on being ‘perfect in a paper-plot’ as Owen Feltham termed it in writing ‘Of War and Soldiers.’ Unfortunately, they overlooked the fact that a plot, whether on paper or not, must be kept strictly secret till it comes off.

The constant development of the scheme and the mass of new directions which this entailed resulted in a great many people being let into the secret: yet secrecy was as imperative as speed.

As the plan was evolved during the winter and early spring of 1917, and took definite form, it could be seen to differ largely from Joffre’s as outlined at Chantilly. Thus, the two separate French attacks on the Roye–Lassigny front and to the south of the Aisne, which Joffre’s plan proposed, were to be knit together; whilst the second of these was to become far the more important. The great stroke was to be delivered on the Aisne front from Reims and the Aisne Canal to the river Oise: whilst subsidiary operations by the British in the Arras district and on the Ancre and by the French armies of the north on the Roye–Lassigny front were, meanwhile, to fix and wear down the enemy’s forces and reserves, drawing them from the principal front.

The rupture on the Aisne achieved, an army of manœuvre was to be introduced to start the war of movement and exploit the success, and the massed French forces on this front were then to drive their way north in the general direction Craonne–Guise. The Roye–Lassigny attack would at the same time press on to St. Quentin, with the British on its left aiming at Cambrai. Such was the idea before the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line started in earnest and modified Nivelle’s proposed operations north of his main, or Aisne, offensive.

The group of French armies of the centre under Pétain

were allotted a lesser part. They were to support Micheler's attack on the Aisne by engaging the enemy's attention in the neighbourhood of the Mort-Homme, etc. After March 15, Nivelle gave directions for Pétain to attack vigorously on the Nauroy-Auberive front for the same purpose. At the same time a small bit of line opposite Laffaux was added to the offensive front.

The French armies of the east, under Castelnau, were to await events.

Finally, by April 5, 1917, the scheme was completed thus : For the rupture : the British to start the subsidiary attack as described in the last chapter. On the right of the Fifth British Army, Franchet d'Espérey, commanding the French northern army group (G.A.N.), to strike west and south of St. Quentin on the front Harly-Alaincourt. In liaison with this French northern group the Fifth and Sixth Armies of Reserve (G.A.R.) were to make their attacks on the Aisne front, and to bear, after the rupture of the enemy's lines, in the direction Guise-Verviers-Hirson.¹ This arrangement appeared practicable by about the close of March, when it was found that Franchet d'Espérey was able, owing to the depth of the Hindenburg Retreat, to push his forces, without striking a blow, as far as St. Quentin.

Pétain's central group was to co-operate by means of the Fourth French Army with Micheler's armies by taking the offensive west of the Suippe after the capture of the Moronvilliers height.

It is curious to recall that, as in 1918, the Belgian Army, too, was to play its part in the Nivelle plan : it was, first, to break the enemy's lines about Steenstraat and Dixmude.

As to exploitation and the war of movement after the swift, initial Aisne rupture, the British, having secured Cambrai and Douai, were to march on Valenciennes and Mons. The Belgians, in liaison with us, would at the same time press on against Roulers and Gand. Franchet d'Espérey's northern group would secure the important railways passing through

¹ Three towns lying in a triangle some forty miles north of Craonne.

Hirson towards Valenciennes, Maubeuge, and Cambrai. The task of the remaining French Armies was the conquest of the entire Aisne district and then of the country between the rivers Meuse, Sormonne and Oise.

The plan had thus developed, during the opening months of 1917, into a big conception indeed. It was to open on an eighty-kilometre front. It was mapped out from, and before, the start in a more ambitious manner than was our offensive of 1918 when the Allies in July and early in August were feeling their way towards the initiative after the successful counter-stroke by French, American and British troops on July 18. The scheme was bold, inspiring. It envisaged fighting from the Suippe to the Scarpe, a far larger field of action than any on the Western Front since the beginning of the war. There is no need to carp at it on that score as some of its critics in France did. Where, unfortunately, it did lie open to grave and well-founded misgivings, French and British alike, was that the great drive and rout of the enemy's forces, and the destruction of his lines of communication far and wide, depended on an excessively quick and complete success by the opening blow of the French Army; and if this first operation should hang fire or its executants falter through heavy casualties, the whole thing would fall through; for there was to be no alternative.

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So the plan was completed by the French Higher Command for the offensive which was to break the enemy's armies in the west. It had been adopted with enthusiasm by the French Government after the removal of Joffre.¹ The British War Cabinet had followed suit a month or two later in the same spirit, and subordinated itself—at least, had subordinated its Commander-in-Chief—to the will of its Ally. According to two French writers with considerable access to official documents—M. Abel Ferry and Lieut.-Col.

¹ M. Painlevé insists that Joffre himself, being deposed, recommended Nivelle for the post of Commander-in-Chief, and that this advice was approved by various members of the French Government in December 1916!

Rousset—it was willing, as we have seen, to go even further than its Ally ; and to get rid of that Commander-in-Chief altogether unless he bent himself to the will of the French military leader. Rarely, if ever, in the history of war has an untried leader, with a new and vastly ambitious plan of campaign, found such unqualified support from the heads of two great nations. It did not signify that the leader had just been put in the wrong by a strategic retreat of the enemy which, with strange obstinacy, he refused to take seriously till it was virtually completed, though it would leave a considerable portion of his scheme in the air : that could be passed over by his ardent supporters in both Governments as merely a technical, military point in which the civil powers could not be expected to concern themselves. Nor, apparently, did it signify that, among his own military colleagues, the most experienced and judicious shook their heads and doubted whether the battle could be won within 24 or 48 hours ; who only half believed in the rupture and regarded the exploitation as a chimera. Were not some of those who harboured such pessimistic doubts believers in the odious necessity of wearing down the immense fighting strength of the enemy before essaying to destroy him within a day or two—wicked, reactionary believers in *la guerre d'usure* ! That would mean a return to the costly, disastrous policy of the Somme, in which Joffre, Haig and Foch had indulged themselves and the triumphant enemy for five months with scarcely a break ; and generalship which lends itself to such a thing as that must not be attended to.

Therefore as the time for the French offensive drew near, Nivelle's prospects—as far as support by the two Governments was concerned—looked bright.¹ The relations between the two Higher Commands were satisfactory again. The danger of Germany forestalling us in the initiative, which had oppressed French opinion, military and civil,

¹ The Battle of the Aisne was well known of, one might almost say well advertised, in advance. People envisaged the coloured troops under Mangin carrying with irresistible élan the plateau of Vauclerc, etc. It was even examined and approved by a parliamentary commission.

since the winter of 1916 was over: and there was the comforting knowledge that the Allies on the Western Front were well above the enemy in man and rifle strength.

Suddenly the whole ministerial position altered. Nivelle's high hopes fell low. The Briand Ministry collapsed before the close of March. Lyautey retired from his office of Minister for War through a dispute over the organisation of the French aviation service. Briand, the Premier, handed in his resignation to Poincaré on March 17. By the end of the third week of March 1917 a new French Cabinet was in office, with Ribot as Premier and Painlevé as Minister for War; the former impartial, it may be, as regards the question of the fitness or otherwise of Nivelle for the post of Commander-in-Chief, the latter a disbeliever in Nivelle's whole plan of campaign.

There ensued a series of extraordinary events, ministerial and military muddled together, which may be regarded, according to the sympathies of the observer, as either the persecution or the prosecution of the French Commander-in-Chief.

No sooner was the new Government in power than the misgivings, suspicions, dreads of a large and impulsive section of French politicians and soldiers found loud expression. Some French writers have put all the blame for the campaign against Nivelle and his plans on the new Minister for War. But was M. Painlevé actually much more than the powerful mouthpiece of a widespread distrust of the approaching offensive, a dread in France that it might not succeed and might lose many men? Painlevé, whether or not he mainly appealed to the Left side in the French Chamber, could not have carried through a successful campaign against the French military command and the offensive if he had not stood in this matter for a large and powerful section of French opinion. He, like the new Premier, was no doubt approved by the Left, and even extreme Left, as representing the civil against the 'militarist' point of view. The strong opposition against the powers of the French Higher Command has been touched on: it feared in those powers some re-

newal of Cæsarism, if not of imperialism or a monarchic movement. Briand had not dominated French leadership in the field enough to satisfy people who were haunted by this menace. Ribot and notably Painlevé were welcomed as likely to prove firmer on this civilian, non-Cæsarist side : and had not Nivelle's conception of one masterstroke to rescue France from Germany, and place her indisputably in the forefront of military nations, something of Cæsarism or Napoleonism about it ?

The new French Secretary for War no doubt led the campaign against Nivelle, within the French Government. But he had, before long, a sympathiser in Ribot ; whilst the correspondence and telephonic communications between M. Poincaré and Nivelle, late in April, over the protest of M. Ybarnegaray, a French Deputy, shows that the President of the Republic also had some misgivings about the Aisne offensive. The French Government was not out of sympathy with a large section in and out of Parliament in this matter. It is futile to describe the movement as merely one of enemy agents and notorious ' pacifists ' : Pétain himself distrusted the Nivelle plan, and criticised it on more than one occasion when called into counsel by Ministers, and, as we shall find, several of Nivelle's most important subordinates in the G.A.R. lost faith in it as a whole.

These apprehensions were not unreasonable. They were not unpatriotic. But what was unfortunate was the manner in which, almost at the last minute, just as the British Army was going into action according to agreement, and the French Army was preparing for its great stroke on the Aisne front, the French statesmen adopted a critical, a semi-hostile attitude towards the whole offensive. It was their duty to stop the offensive altogether well before the British struck, or to forward it by all means in their power. They contrived to do neither. Instead, they misspent the time of their Army leader, who should have been at his Headquarters, by a series of disquieting interviews and councils, and damped down the ardour, already perceptibly diminishing, of Nivelle's subordinates. Then they declared

half-heartedly for the offensive, on Nivelle offering his resignation.

This procedure was repeated a few weeks later when the British intervened and tried to save what they could of the wrecked plan : except that, in the latter instance, the French Ministry really had made up its mind to stop fighting on a considerable scale and to dismiss its Commander-in-Chief. The Allied cause survived this shocking fiasco because the British Army held firm and struck hard from June to the close of the year. Even so, it is difficult to feel confident that the French Army could have got through 1917 without disaster on the scale of Caporetto had the enemy been better informed of the state of things on the Western Front and quicker to act. Why did not Ludendorff make up his mind to concentrate at once against the French lines by withdrawing more and more forces from the east ? It was a risk worth taking : and, after the Russian revolution, it was not a very formidable one. Writing of the mutinies in the French Army, Ludendorff says, ' We had heard but little about them and that only by degrees. Only later did we learn the whole truth.' That speaks poorly for the enemy's Intelligence in 1917.

Three days before we struck at Arras, and ten before the French began their own battle, the French Ministers called the leading French generals to a consultation or examination at Compiègne.¹ There was no political-military conclave

¹ Three days before the Compiègne 'reunion' there was a kind of preliminary conference between Ministers and the French Commander-in-Chief, when Painlevé put various questions to him about the offensive. Also, at about the same time Painlevé consulted 'individually' the commanders of the different groups of armies to be employed.

The French Ministry still retained some members who were favourable to Nivelle and his plan ; notably M. Albert Thomas, the Minister of Munitions, and Admiral Lacaze, who had helped to enthuse the British War Cabinet a month or two earlier in the year ; and both attended the conferences of April 3 and April 6. But they were clearly no longer in the ascendant. However, at the gathering on April 3 it was decided that Nivelle should attack on the front he had selected. He was to concentrate on his preparations in particular for taking the first two positions, and was to choose favouring weather for his attack. He had once again declared his confidence in a swift break-through on the Aisne front to be followed

during the war quite equal to that one. No official report of the proceedings seems to have been made, but the substance of them has long been common property on the other side of the Channel. Military and civilian writers there have been fairly well agreed as to some of the questions put to the generals and the generals' replies.¹ Nivelle was present; Pétain; de Castelnau, Franchot d'Espérey, Micheler. The civil power was represented by the President of the Republic, the Premier, the Minister for War, Admiral Lacaze, and M. Albert Thomas. Painlevé expressed the uneasiness as to the offensive which prevailed within and without the Government. He was not in favour of the Government interfering in the execution of the operations of which the Commander-in-Chief had charge, but the Government was responsible for the general conduct of the war. The conditions regarded as essential by the Chantilly Conference and by Nivelle himself had not come to pass. He spoke of the Hindenburg Retreat and the paralysis of Russia as events changing the situation. We could await now the intervention on our side of the United States. He counselled prudence: was opposed to risking all on one

by immediate exploitation. But between April 3 and April 6 Colonel Messimy, a former Minister for War, intervened with a statement directed against Nivelle's plan, and this at once put Ministers on the *qui vive* again. Compiègne followed.

¹ The questions sometimes put, even officially, by Cabinet Ministers and others to soldiers have, it is to be hoped, been preserved for the future gaiety of nations, if many of those at Compiègne have been lost. There is good reason to believe that the British Commander-in-Chief was in 1918 suddenly asked by the leader of the House of Commons: 'If you were a German commander, would you think there was a sufficient chance of a smashing offensive to justify you in incurring the losses which would be incurred?' Also, that he was asked by a statesman at the same solemn official gathering: 'Can the Germans possibly break through our lines?' There is a tale—far from ill-founded—of the French leader being asked at a conference in May 1918 whether it was still his strategic idea as in March to preserve the junction of the Allied Armies, cover Paris, and cover the Channel ports? One version of this incident is that Foch replied 'Yes,' and passed on the question and reply for approval to the British leader! Pure amateurs and nobodies at the base need not, after all, have felt so shy of asking naïve questions about the war and exposing their ignorance.

supreme throw. In any case, we ought not to risk irreparable losses, disproportionate with the results likely to be obtained.

Nivelle, replying, travelled over the old ground ; recalled the Chantilly Conference and its decision for an early Allied offensive to forestall any German initiative ; followed by the conferences, and the same decision, at London in January, at Calais in February, at London again in March. As to Russia, she was in a state of anarchy no doubt, but who could tell whether within a few months she might not be forced to sign a separate peace with the enemy and that his forces would not in such a case be thrown on the Western Front ? Moreover, to wait for the armed help of America would be to give up hope of ending the war in 1917. As for Italy, she would not undertake an offensive unless by taking the offensive ourselves we kept the enemy's forces on our front. To suffer Germany to take the initiative, and strike at us, would be the worst of policies. He emphasised the fact that the rupture was a matter of 24 at most 48 hours, and could be stopped if it did not succeed within that space of time. He had no intention of starting another Somme.

The leaders of the groups of armies were then, with Nivelle's consent, invited by the President to give their views. De Castelnau asked to be excused. He had made no special study of the plan. His own group was not to be involved in the attack, at any rate in an early stage of the attack. Franchet d'Espérey, according to one account—though not Painlevé's—recalled the Allied conferences and decisions just referred to. That would certainly be a safe line for a subordinate of the Commander-in-Chief to limit himself to, and a loyal one. How, when we come to think of it, could a Government seriously propose to back out of its engagements a matter of hours before its Ally had arranged—at its own request—to start a great attack, elaborately prepared for months past, on the secondary front ? Leaving your Ally to attack 'in the air' after he has—at your urgent request—subordinated both his plans

and his Higher Command to your own might do for war in comic opera. And yet, if something of the sort was not in Ministers' minds on April 6, it is hard to understand what on earth they were driving at. We may be told that the idea was not at this time to abandon the offensive, only to whittle it down into a kind of minor operation, to economise diminishing French man-power. If so, how came it that the British—who were also called into consultation by Ministers shortly before the Compiègne Conference—were not sounded as to whether their forthcoming attack might not, similarly, be modified?

Micheler gave his view that the attack should be delivered speedily, directly the preparations were complete and the weather favourable—which was contrary to the information about this leader's views just supplied to the French Government by Messimy. Pétain seems to have held that the French Army possessed the forces required for the rupture of the enemy's lines, at any rate of the first two enemy positions. His attitude was not reassuring. In fact nobody present, except Nivelle, seems to have expressed the least faith in the full Aisne battle plan. Accordingly at the close of the séance, Nivelle proposed to place his resignation in the hands of the President of the Republic. Whereupon everybody present was agreed that this could not be. 'Votre démission, au moment d'une grande bataille!' No, the Commander-in-Chief must stay, the Commander-in-Chief had their confidence. On, then, with the great offensive, on the lines indicated at the conference of April 3.¹

Was not Compiègne the perfect sequel to Calais?

* * * * *

Nivelle left the conference doubting the sincerity of these belated professions of faith in him. He seems still to have considered the question of resigning his command. According to Lieut.-Colonel Rousset, in a temperate book, *La Bataille de l'Aisne*, he was dissuaded from this step by

¹ According to Painlevé, Nivelle assured those present that, if he had assembled 1,200,000 men by the Aisne, it was with the object of exploiting, eventually, the rupture he expected.

several friends, particularly M. Albert Thomas, a hearty Government supporter of himself and his plan.

There is no doubt the French Ministry at once discounted and authorised the Nivelle plan ; and contrived, with an agility rare even among political experts, to exhibit both attitudes at the same gathering. At a commission of enquiry on the Aisne battle, held in the summer of 1917, under the generals Brugère, Foch and Gouraud, Nivelle seems to have been mildly rebuked by these soldiers for consenting to attend the Compiègne Conference ; though, as the civil power had been in such a marked manner introduced, after the fall of Joffre, into the realm of the French Higher Command—and apparently welcomed by that authority—it is not easy to see how he could have defied Ministers thus.¹

It was made clear at this enquiry that the Government had at Compiègne authorised Nivelle to proceed with his plans. 'C'est donc à lui qu'incombe la principale responsabilité' (Pétain). But there was a reserve under this halting authorisation. The offensive on the Aisne, if it failed within a short space of time to realise Nivelle's hopes of the swift rupture followed by exploitation, was not to be converted

¹ The report of this enquiry seems to have been inconclusive—and just as its members were going to reassemble and go anew into the operations of April 16-23, 1917, Caporetto occurred and the Aisne was forgotten. Its president, General Brugère, declared : 'Pour la préparation comme pour l'exécution de cette offensive, le général Nivelle n'a pas été à la hauteur de la tâche écrasante qu'il avait assumée.' But this was his personal view, signed only by himself, and did not involve his colleagues. Another part of the report ran : 'La part du hasard est si grande à la guerre qu'il paraît d'affirmer que le plan du général Nivelle n'était pas réalisable. Il faut reconnaître toutefois que le commandant en chef avait fait choix, d'un terrain extrêmement difficile et qu'il attaquait à fond, sur le front de 80 kilomètres, un ennemi averti, formidablement retranché.'

But : 'En résumé, quelles que soient les observations que l'on puisse présenter sur la direction donnée à l'offensive du 16 avril, le général Nivelle n'en reste pas moins l'excellent commandant de la 11^e armée pendant les grandes journées de Verdun.' Probably both sides in this dispute could find some good consolation, or at any rate some good 'copy' in the report. Whatever the enquirers thought of April 1917 and its results, they were clearly, as soldiers, not going to gratify civilian censurers by a condemnation of Nivelle and all his works.

into 'another Somme' in which this time the French rather than the British Army would play the leading part.

Nivelle had himself encouraged the French Ministers to bargain for this reservation. To be fair to Painlevé and Ribot, we must remember this. It has been often stated that they stopped the Aisne offensive. It is true. They ultimately did stop it. But Nivelle himself gave them their cue—if they needed it—by his revision of the original plan at a very early stage of the battle.

Compiègne, April 6, ended, for a fortnight or so, the intervention of Ministers. M. Galli, the French Deputy, writing of the Commander-in-Chief's uneasy time at Beauvais and then at Compiègne, his Headquarters, remarks, 'n'échappait pas à la tyrannie du téléphone¹;' and he certainly was rung up rather freely by the civil power. After some delay through bad weather and the need of final preparations, the attack was fixed for April 16. On the evening of April 15 a short and admirable order by Nivelle was communicated to the French troops. 'Aux Officiers, sous-officiers et soldats des armées françaises: L'heure est venue. Confiance, courage et vive la France!' At six o'clock next morning the Fifth and Sixth Armies, under Mazel and Mangin respectively, attacked the German positions. The first line—of the first German position—was carried, and at points the attack penetrated some three kilometres beyond. Towards Juvin-court the second enemy position was entered. The attack collapsed before the Craonne plateau, which the IInd Corps could not take. The French troops also failed to pass beyond the crest of Mont Sapigneul. Mont Spin was taken, but soon lost. A fierce struggle continued here on the front of the Fifth Army through the day, without much result. The French were met by a severe, light machine-gun fire, and by heavy counter-attacks. Tanks were used by the Fifth French Army in this battle. It was intended they should take the third German position; but they were not effec-

¹ The British Commander-in-Chief's way was wiser—he would speak to nobody on the telephone! Only about twice was an exception made to this rule.

tive, and never reached that position. For one thing, the progress of the infantry proved much slower than arranged for by the horary. The attacking troops became badly 'telescoped' in trying to carry out the horary.

Enemy observation points were not captured in time, and the defenders were able to regulate their artillery effectively. Many tanks were set on fire. Also, scientific liaison between tanks and infantry had been neglected. The French troops did not understand how to work in with the tanks, and gained little by their advance. It is interesting to recall the fact—referred to in an earlier chapter—that Haig had been criticised for employing tanks in September 1916, instead of waiting till the Ally was provided with them. In January or February 1917, the writer himself heard this complaint during a visit to Verdun. The criticism is not convincing when one remembers that, seven months after the début of the tank, the French, with British experience to profit by, had not yet mastered the lesson that a scientific liaison between infantry and tanks is absolutely imperative. The defects of the preparations for the Aisne battle have perhaps been exaggerated, but the arrangements as to tanks were decidedly defective. Nor was the tank employed in the Aisne battle—the Renault—an improvement on Mark I.

To the left of the Fifth Army, the Sixth, including French Colonial troops—II^e Corps Colonial—had made some progress by eight o'clock in the morning. Detachments had reached beyond the Chemin-des-Dames to the Ailette river. On the Vauclerc plateau, however, they were checked, like the troops of the Fifth Army, by the fire of large numbers of machine guns. The Colonial troops fell back. Difficulties and dangers, not altogether dissimilar from those experienced by the new Kitchener Army on the opening days of the Somme, thus reappeared in 1917 against highly trained French troops—and were again to make themselves felt against newcomers from the United States far on in 1918. After its initial success, then, against the enemy's first line, the Sixth Army, like its neighbours, fluctuated between

repulse and victory : but not victory at all on the scale that had been looked for : and, after ten hours' hard struggle, it ceased to advance and secured the ground it had won. It had captured a good number of prisoners and plenty of war material.

Duchêne's Tenth Army had been placed in readiness, meanwhile, to pass quickly through the Fifth and Sixth and exploit far and wide the expected rupture of the three enemy lines. By eight o'clock it was over the Aisne, prepared for its stroke. It was to debouch on Monchalon and Vieux-Laon between the II^e Corps Colonial and the Ist Corps. But the attack, gallant and successful in places, was far from achieving the break-through. So the close of the day found the Tenth Army still waiting. The resistance of the enemy was resolute. His machine-gun defence was not to be broken.

On April 17 Nivelle went to Micheler's headquarters at Savigny-sur-Ardre, surveyed the situation, and forthwith modified his plans. He gave orders that the attacks of the Sixth Army were to be stopped, and that those of the Fifth should now be made north-westwards not northwards. He believed that the enemy meant to stand firm on Mangin's front, and that further progress there would be hard and costly. The revised directions reached the Sixth Army somewhat late, and meanwhile it had attacked anew and made considerable progress.

The changed orders to the Fifth and Sixth Armies show that Nivelle himself regarded his full plan as impracticable within thirty hours or so of its start. And was it not to be the full plan—swift rupture of all the enemy positions and the insertion of an army of exploitation between the Fifth and Sixth Armies—or nothing ? However one may differ from the French Ministers, and blame them for intervening in matters essentially in the province of the military leaders, one cannot overlook this : over and over again, the French Commander-in-Chief had stressed it. The battle, a single battle—pedantic emphasis was laid on its integrity, its oneness—might prove long and fierce after the exploitation

army had passed through and the whole Allied line was moving against the enemy. That was not kept even from politicians most fearful of casualties. But far more was it stressed that this would be, must be, an offensive enjoying an immense advantage over its predecessors—namely, the piercing of the German front in a manner so complete that the army of exploitation could at once pass through.

Perhaps the more ardent supporters of this original principle—which was never lost sight of or modified by its originator till April 17, the second day of the battle—might say that to arrest the Sixth Army and change the direction of the Fifth after a day's fighting did not logically imply abandonment at this very early stage: that there had been no cast-iron proposition that the direction of the Fifth Army must be north, and that the arrest of the Sixth Army's progress was only a tactical, minor change. Nevertheless one perceives in these directions on the 17th the beginning of the end of the great plan. Nivelle was thinking of switching off to a new, and a more modest, design. He was not prepared to see the thing through: the séance at Compiègne, the misgivings of most of his subordinates—Mangin alone appears to have stood firm, and it is not clear Mangin believed in the Nivelle time-table—were too much for him. And there are his own declarations that the rupture must be achieved within twenty-four or at the utmost forty-eight hours. Had the British and French forces opened the Battle of the Somme with any like declaration or understanding, they would have found themselves very awkwardly placed after a day or so of fighting. But the strategy of Joffre and Haig before the Somme stressed nothing of the kind. On the contrary, we made it clear that the wearing-down of the enemy forces was a main purpose, and that geographical objectives, though not overlooked, were subsidiary.

It has been suggested in an earlier chapter that when the British War Cabinet in January and February 1917 threw themselves whole-heartedly into Nivelle's scheme, they went in for a great gamble. Does the metaphor seem

far-fetched ? Surely not, when we remember that everything was to depend on the first, extremely difficult, lightning-quick stroke for crumpling up the enemy. Probably the British War Cabinet did not at once recognise it was in for a great gamble. It failed to understand the immense difficulty of the opening stroke : and it never thought about what would happen if that stroke failed. But that is the gambling spirit.

During the 17th the Fifth Army's difficulties were further increased by bad weather which interfered with artillery work. The operations between the Miette and the Aisne were postponed, an attack was tried on the plateau of California. Some progress was made during the day, and German defensive works were captured. The Sixth Army being attacked at night, had been forced to give ground at Mont-des-Singes and elsewhere : at some other points it succeeded in advancing. Meanwhile, the Fourth Army, one of Pétain's G.A.C., had attacked and made some progress against a strong resistance. This was the attack on the 'massif' of Moronvilliers east of Reims. Ludendorff tells us the loss of the heights there was serious, but the French on attempting to descend were caught by German artillery fire and driven back.

Between the 18th and 23rd the battle continued on the Aisne front with varying fortune. Positions were won and lost, or lost and won, from day to day, but the success of the attack was of an average character. No dominating position was secured by the French, though they were able to consolidate the new position north of the Aisne. The Germans continued to defend their ground resolutely. The Fifth Army's attack towards the north-west had not proved encouraging. Brimont fort remained in the enemy's hands. The French attacks on the crests of Sapignieu and Spin had failed, and this forbade progress towards the north-east as the attackers might have been taken in the flank.

After five or six days' fighting, all idea of the fulfilment of the original plan was obviously over. But Nivelle did not wish to cease an offensive. Between April 21 and 25

there were no considerable operations on the Aisne front, but the army commanders were being urged to push on with fresh preparations. He called on the British on the 21st to 'profiter des opérations engagées sur le front français pour augmenter l'ampleur des attaques et viser des objectifs plus éloignés. La collaboration anglaise à notre offensive commune ne sera en effet réellement efficace que si son action s'exerce sur une profondeur suffisante pour menacer sérieusement l'adversaire et l'obliger à engager des réserves importantes. Prononcer l'effort principal dans la région sud-est de Quéant, de manière à faire tomber par une attaque de revers la ligne Quéant-Drocourt et à pouvoir progresser sans retard en direction de Cambrai et Douai.' Cambrai and Douai had been leading objectives in the general Allied advance which was to follow the stroke on the Aisne. It is not credible the French leader was any longer thinking of them in that matter, but he was intent on the continuation of the offensive; and he was for the British striking hard and deep.¹

He makes his new plan clear by fresh orders to his own armies. Valenciennes has disappeared, Mons and Maubeuge too, the Hirson railways and the Belgian Army's march towards Roulers and Gand in liaison with the British. The army set apart for exploitation after the rupture is to concentrate its attention on the plateaux of Craonne and California. The disengagement of France and Belgium has dwindled to the disengagement of Reims. And all this on the strength of a bare week's fighting on the Aisne front. Lieut.-Colonel Rousset would assure us that the appearances are deceptive—'en réalité, le plan primitif subsistait dans son entier, mitigé seulement par quelques variants qu'exigeaient les circonstances.' But one cannot take that seriously. The great Nivelle scheme elaborated between

¹ Observe in any case that Nivelle, having woefully failed, is looking to the British to help him out somehow. It had been no part of the original Nivelle plan that the British should profit by the French operations to advance on Cambrai and Douai—except on the realisation of the great break-through. The British task was to strike first so that the French might profit by the engagement of German divisions on our front.

December and April has in truth been dropped. It has gone the way of Chantilly. A modest operation, much more on the scale of the attacks at Verdun in October and December 1916, and very likely feasible, was set in its place. Thus :—

‘Le but des opérations est : 1° de dégager Reims par une attaque combinée des IV^e et V^e armées. La V^e armée est chargée d’enlever les hauteurs de Sapiigneul, du mont Spin et de Brimont. La IV^e dégagera vers le nord et le nord-ouest les sommets conquis des hauteurs de Moronvilliers. La X^e armée devra s’emparer de la crête militaire septentrionale et orientale des plateaux de Craonne, Californie, et Vauclerc, ainsi que des avancées de cette crête jusqu’aux entrées des abris. Elle enlèvera ensuite la première position allemande entre le boyeau Persan et le bois de Chevreux, en étendant l’attaque jusqu’à la conquête de la ligne générale Tranchée du Marteau et de l’Enclume, de manière à avoir une base de départ ultérieure pour l’attaque du front Corbény-Juvincourt. La VI^e armée prononcera une action sur l’ensemble du Chemin des Dames.’

But before this new stage was reached the French civil power had grown restless and was preparing for fresh intervention. Almost immediately after the start of the Aisne battle the British had good reason to believe that French Ministers did not mean the offensive to continue on a considerable scale unless there was speedily an assurance of success. On April 19 Painlevé was at Compiègne again to learn from Nivelle how things stood. On April 21 Nivelle was called to a gathering of Ministers at the Elysée. It was stated in an American paper, and widely spread, that Painlevé stopped the offensive within the first few days. This was quite inaccurate. In a vigorous defence of his conduct, ‘*La Vérité sur l’Offensive du 16 Avril 1917*,’ published in a special issue of *La Renaissance* in November 1919, Painlevé declared, ‘Tout le monde savait que dès la soirée du 16 avril, les exécutants, même les plus optimistes, considéraient l’affaire comme manquée.’ Nivelle himself, he says, arrested the offensive on April 21 and ended it on

April 30: and if by 'the offensive' we mean the plan for swift rupture and exploitation followed by a general advance of the Allied Armies, Painlevé's statement is indisputable. Nivelle had forestalled the French statesmen. Their intervention, which now grew insistent, related to the scope of the new plan.

Within forty-eight hours of the start of the Battle of the Aisne there arose a great outcry over the casualties in the Fifth and Sixth French Armies. Official figures¹ as to the killed and wounded appear to have been put much too high; and these were added to, doubled even, by alarmists at the base. Thus the wild total of 200,000 casualties for the first day or two was talked off, and the Sixth Army under Mangin, with its coloured troops, was declared to be the most terrible sufferer. Actually the casualties of the Fifth Army were heavier than those of the Sixth, but Mangin, being known better than Mazel as a hard-fighting French general, was chosen for special invective. The real casualty list was not low—considering the indifferent progress made by the chief armies of the attack. According to an official table given to the Chamber of Deputies after the offensive, the total casualties between April 16 and April 29 amounted to slightly under 108,000 in the Fifth, Sixth, Tenth, Fourth, and Third Armies, the last, Humbert's, being only nominally engaged in the fighting. The casualties in Mazel's army were stated to be 49,526, in Mangin's 30,296, in Duchêne's 4849, and in Antoine's 21,697.

But the outcry was extravagant, and the storm of abuse which broke out against Mangin particularly, and soon removed him from his command, was unfair. He was not the butcher he was declared to be by hysterical politicians and journalists; and there is good evidence that he studied his own front with care, and took precaution to keep down unnecessary casualties.²

Had the rupture been achieved, and the army of exploita-

¹ Even the figures of G.Q.G., apparently.

² Ludendorff writes of the French casualties, April 16-18, as 'appalling,' but he also describes the German casualties as 'extraordinarily high.'

tion passed through, the French casualties at the Battle of the Aisne must have far exceeded 108,000. It has always to be remembered that in this offensive the French Armies were to play by far the grander part. Theirs was to be the heroic effort of the war. Nivelle wished his country to excel as a great military power ; and, to achieve this, he was willing she should make further sacrifices. He was, after his retirement, scoffed at for his 'Napoleonic' conceptions. But Nivelle's fault did not lie there. It was not the bigness of the plan that was objectionable ; or the fact that he wished France above all nations to excel in the war, to win it by a superb stroke. His fault, as we have seen, lay rather in the overfaith he placed in an extremely quick rupture of the enemy lines by methods which had prevailed only in a few lesser operations. He thus invited the criticism and outcry which followed the failure of the stroke to achieve an immediate success. Also, he failed to recognise—as Pétain on the contrary seems to have recognised—that he had not a weapon strong enough for the stroke. Many of his troops opened the attack with fine courage and confidence. But far from all were equal to the powerful resistance and the counter-attacks with which they were soon met. There was a Russian contingent in the Fifth Army, for instance, which, we are told, only decided to attack at all after it had taken a vote on the question. Moreover, there were divisions which—to put it moderately—were tired : one of these, it is said, had had no rest since December. The army had begun to be affected by the disease which kept it from further heavy fighting in the latter part of 1917.

The original Nivelle plan being thus ended, the question was, should the offensive continue in another form or be altogether abandoned ? The British were consulted by the French Government, and were explicit on the point. Haig and the British War Cabinet were well agreed that the offensive ought to continue. Both told the French Government so in clear terms.

Warned of the attitude of French Ministers, and naturally

disquieted by the prospect, the British War Cabinet looked for the support of the British Commander-in-Chief. If the French retired from the offensive, who could say what would happen to the Allied cause?

The British Commander-in-Chief, as already shown, had never been enthusiastic over the Nivelle plan. He knew the German Army on the west, though inferior in 1917 in gross numbers to the Allied forces, had to be worn down by long, very hard fighting before it could be overcome and driven out of France and Belgium. That great and costly task could not be shirked, as Nivelle's—hitherto—most ardent supporters among British and French politicians vaguely hoped. The British Commander-in-Chief would, as we know, have much preferred the Chantilly plan agreed on between Joffre and himself and the other Allies. But a hard-striking offensive was imperative in any case, and having once given his pledge at Calais to work in with the French he never looked back. The offensive had been entered upon by French and British on a large scale: it ought, he insisted, to be prosecuted by both Allies with all the means in their power. To the French Ministers who courteously consulted him, and to the British War Cabinet, he gave this advice unflinchingly.¹ It was not liked by the former, it was adopted heartily by the latter. French writers narrate how, in reply to the British Prime Minister's enquiry as to his views, he replied on April 19: 'De grands résultats ne sont jamais obtenus en guerre tant que la force de l'ennemi n'a pas été brisée; et contre un ennemi puissant et déterminé, opérant avec de gros effectifs sur un large front, c'est une affaire de temps et de durs combats'—good stiffening advice for Government chiefs exceedingly anxious to see the powerful enemy beaten but fearful of outcries or possible outcries at home over casualties, and troubled—not unnaturally—by the differences of opinion among their own military chiefs.

In this instance, it was the Ministers of France, not of

¹ Painlevé had visited British G.H.Q. as early as March 24, and sought the Commander-in-Chief's views.

Britain, who especially needed stiffening. But before the end of 1917 the need was British again—and not less so in 1918, when our Army was nearing the Hindenburg Line.

After giving the British War Cabinet this advice, Haig was asked by Ribot and Painlevé to confer with them at Paris.

The story that he was sent to Paris by the British War Cabinet to stiffen the French Government is a myth. These Ministers were distressed by the French casualties on April 16, 17 and 18, stated to be 120,000. He told them that, if the results obtained were unequal to expectations, they were satisfactory; that the German reserves were now quite below those of the French and British combined—'il fallait donc poursuivre la bataille à fond.'

At a conference at Paris between French and British on the fifth day of the Aisne offensive it was decided that the battle should be continued for a fortnight, and the situation then reviewed. Ribot and Painlevé both declared that, meanwhile, the offensive should not be stopped nor the military plans altered. We had a right to look for such a pledge, for we were still fighting on our own front. Nivelle, as already shown, was arranging for fresh efforts, and three days later we were to attack north and south of the Scarpe.

In a fortnight's time Ministers and soldiers met again on May 4 and 5 in a conference at Paris to review the position. Those present included the French and British Prime Ministers; Painlevé; Admiral Jellicoe and Admiral Lacaze, who were especially concerned as to the effect the offensive might have on the submarine campaign; Nivelle; Haig; and Pétain, who had just been made Chief of the Staff, with the special duty of advising the French Government on the course of military operations and who had power to give orders to Nivelle, whose position as Generalissimo was thus becoming a mockery.

At this second Paris conference it was decided that the British Army's plan of operations for Flanders should be proceeded with. This fact has long been left obscure; the notion being that the British Higher Command somehow

plunged into 'Passchendaele' without the approval of his Government. The contrary happens to be the truth. The Commander-in-Chief stated the fact in his Despatch of December 25, 1917: but the passage in paragraph 4 containing it and another passage in the same paragraph were struck out at home.¹

The action of the British War Cabinet at the meeting on May 4 could not have been firmer or more inspiring. For his conduct at that meeting Mr. Lloyd George has been highly praised by those French soldiers who wished for the offensive to continue and to be pressed resolutely by both Allies: and in this matter he deserves their praise. Ministerial intervention in military operations was too often during the war feeble and dispiriting, or rash and uninformed. But here was an exception. Wellington, in one of his letters written in 1836, expressed his obligations to Ministers at home: 'I always in public as well as in private declared my obligations to the Government for the encouragement and support they gave me and the confidence with which they treated me.' It is right to say that Mr. Lloyd George was backing up the British Higher Command at this juncture, and showing something of the confidence in it that Canning, for example, showed to Wellington. In taking this course he was encouraging all that was best and boldest on both the military and civilian side of our Ally, France. That was one of the agreeable incidents of the Nivelles period.

Admirable was Mr. Lloyd George's distinction—as stated in General Mangin's book—on this occasion between the military and the civil provinces during war. Let the military chiefs, was its purport, keep to themselves, as much as possible, the secrets of their plans of operation. The civil power need not be informed of the exact nature or the date

¹ The deleted words at the beginning and the close of the paragraph were as follows: 'The project of an offensive operation in Flanders, to which I was informed His Majesty's Government attached considerable importance, was one which I had held steadily in view since I had first been entrusted with the chief command of the British Armies in France, and even before that date. . . . Moreover, once this high ground had been secured, further offensive possibilities would be opened up.'

of forthcoming attacks. Such matters ought to be kept strictly secret.

As to the offensive, he urged strongly that it should be continued on a large scale, not limited to lesser operations with two or three divisions at a time. Frankly admitting that the high hopes set on the Nivelle plan had not been realised, he yet enumerated remarkable gains. The enemy had lost 45,000 prisoners, 450 guns, a large extent of ground. True, the Allies, too, had incurred losses—but then war cannot be waged except at that cost. A series of feeble and frequent attacks, after all, are more costly than an attack on a large scale. He appealed to the conference to authorise a common effort with the full power of both nations. Great Britain was resolved to continue the offensive with all her disposable forces—but, naturally, on the understanding that France would act likewise.

The attitude of Ribot and Painlevé was less robust. Some of their observations indicated their uneasiness, their reservations. However, the meeting led to an assurance by the French Government that the French Army would continue the offensive, using the whole of its available forces.

Let us turn back at this point and see what had been going on behind the French front during the past week or ten days.

The humiliation of the French Generalissimo at this period was not, according to his supporters, inflicted solely by the Ministers. Two other classes of politician took the field against him, stirring up the French Government and people. The first consisted of civilians of note who found their way to the front at the opening of the Battle of the Aisne and were concerned, it is said, by the sights they witnessed there. A batch of them visited the headquarters of Micheler at the start of the battle, and there is little doubt they carried away some disagreeable impressions. The number, however, of these visitors has been exaggerated both in France and in America. There were such visitors; and conceivably they did not all hold their tongues on their return from Micheler's headquarters. But among them was

the great man who in November 1917 succeeded Painlevé as Premier—Clémenceau, and he could hardly be suspected of 'defeatist' designs.

Another grievance was the existence of a good many French deputies turned, for the time being, into half soldier and half politician with certain liberties of movement and criticism not enjoyed by the ordinary officer at the front. This inconvenience may not have been peculiar to Nivelle's front. There were, for instance, soldier-politicians on our own front during the war, some of whom rightly forgot their political status whilst others kept more or less alive to it. But the inconvenience was a lesser one on the British than on the French front. Besides, in 1918, the guardians of Parliament in Great Britain took a step which, even if not so intended, would tend to prevent such an inconvenience. When the Government brought in its measure to raise the military age to 50 years, and in certain cases 55, the House of Commons was included among the exempted occupations. That should tend to keep down the number of privileged politicians in khaki; whom it is safer—safer for the fighting men and safer for themselves—to preserve at home.

Now it happened that the Tenth Army included on its staff a distinguished French deputy, M. Ybarnegaray, who watched the course of the Aisne battle with misgivings. He was an officer who had done well in the corps whose task it would be, under the revised plan—the exploitation hopes of the Tenth Army having been dashed—to take Craonne, where there had been fierce fighting in which ultimately the enemy had prevailed. On April 22 he visited the President of the Republic and felt it his duty to warn the French Government that the attack on the Craonne plateau, which had been so costly and fruitless, was to be renewed, and that le Haut Commandement had fixed a date for it which could but lead to fresh disaster as the artillery preparation would be altogether insufficient; and that the general commanding the corps in question and his officers and men were uneasy. The President communicated the substance of this warning to Nivelle himself by telephone,

as coming through certain of the 'exécutants.' Nivelle replied on April 23 that he had fixed no date for the renewal of the attack on Craonne; that none of his lieutenants had been authorised to give such an order, and that, as a fact, it had not been given. The generals commanding the army groups, Micheler, Franchet d'Espérey, and Pétain, had the power to fix such dates, as they would be the fittest judges of the artillery preparation conditions which justified attacks by the infantry. He stated he had just been to the headquarters of Micheler, where he had seen Mazel. There, as it happened, in the presence of the Minister for War, he had given his instructions; and he would ask that Minister to say whether these orders conveyed the impression that the attacks were to be undertaken without sufficient preparation. He expressed surprise that reports, unauthorised and without foundation, should find a listener in the President of the Republic. It was impossible to carry on the command if such insubordination was to be suffered. He proposed to make enquiries as to the commander of the army and the commander of the corps referred to. If they had been guilty of the indiscipline imputed to them, they should be dismissed from their commands. Nivelle then went to the headquarters of Duchêne, as well as of Hirschauer who commanded the XVIIIth Corps. He found that neither had given or received any order as to the date for this attack on Craonne; and that neither had complained of dearth of munitions—on the contrary both declared that all their demands in this respect had been satisfactorily met.

There does appear to have been some order for a preparatory attack, but not under the revised plan. In any case, the incident is an example of the campaign which Nivelle had to carry on against some of his own compatriots and officers during the most precarious days of, so far, the greatest offensive in the war.

Still more significant of the intervention of the politicians at this time was the famous Brimont incident. This has a humorous side, owing to the misunderstanding between the

ministerial and the military authorities, but it has a grave side, too, for it was a distinct step towards the abandonment of the offensive in May. The Fifth Army's attack on the positions Spin, Sapigneul, and Brimont which should have been taken on April 16 or 17 had broken down, it will be remembered, and on the 21st Nivelle had changed his plans. The idea then was to disengage Reims, and, whilst the Fifth Army were to bear north-east attacking these strong points, the Fourth at the same time would, as already arranged, bear north after securing the Moronvilliers heights. The plan, if modest in scope, would entail some hard fighting, for the enemy showed not the least intention of retreating from these strong positions. The German Intelligence probably well understood before the start of the offensive the character of the attack to be made by the Fifth Army. A French non-commissioned officer had been captured shortly before the Aisne battle started, and he possessed a copy of the orders of attack. Soon after the failure of April 16 Wolff's Agency published a statement describing accurately enough the whole design of the French, including the rupture and exploitation, and the length of the fighting front. It emphasised the fact that success could only be obtained by great speed in penetrating deeply the German lines. The Brimont and Auberive-Moronvilliers operations were specially mentioned in this statement by Wolff.

The attention of Painlevé and others, immediately after Nivelle had revised his plans, was particularly directed to the forthcoming Brimont operations. They feared further heavy casualties on this part of the front. Was not France being bled white? Painlevé visited the headquarters of Mazel. He was conducted to an observatory of the Fifth Army and there the question of the casualties was raised, and the Brimont attack. Some ludicrous misunderstanding seems to have arisen over figures. On April 25, Nivelle, at Paris, in the presence of Poincaré, Ribot, and Painlevé, described his new plans. When he spoke of attacking Brimont, Painlevé said that he had been told on good authority that the operations would cost the French Army

60,000 men. Would it be practicable to proceed with the new plan minus the attack on Brimont? How Reims could be disengaged without a successful attack on Brimont, Spin, and Sapigneul heights by the Fifth Army is not clear, for obviously the plan depended on strokes by the Fifth and Sixth Armies in unison. However, the question of the Brimont operations was left undecided until Nivelle acquired further information. As to the casualty misunderstanding there are various versions. Painlevé states that he understood the estimate of from 60,000 to 65,000 referred not to a single operation directed against Brimont alone but to the four operations which it was now proposed to carry out with the Sixth, Tenth, Fourth and Fifth French Armies. His opponents accuse him of talking of a probable loss of 60,000 men in an attack on Brimont alone. This charge against his sense of proportion can hardly be taken seriously.

However, it is evident that the Government's feeling against the attack on Brimont by the Fifth Army remained strong. Possibly the Fifth Army commander had not concealed from the Minister the fact that the operation would be a stiff one. On April 27 Nivelle, after going to the Fifth Army's headquarters and arranging the plans for the attack, communicated again with Painlevé. He intimated that the attack would be made on May 1: but, if the Government desired, it could be postponed, seeing that the attacks on Craonne and the plateau California would not be made till May 3. He was called to Paris on April 28, and reported this information to Painlevé.

On April 29 Nivelle was informed by telephone that Pétain had been appointed Chief of the General Staff; and that the Government had decided the attack on Brimont should not be proceeded with.

Thus on April 26 the French Ministers had informed the British Commander-in-Chief, after seeking and listening to his views, that the offensive on the Aisne was to be continued 'sans que les lignes générales du plan d'opérations arrêtées en commun fussent modifiées' (Mangin's *Comment finit la*

Guerre, p. 139) : then, on April 29, they gave specific directions to Nivelle to cut out of the offensive the Brimont operation. Whether what in the end remained of the revised plan could be designated 'an offensive' is a nice point. The French Ministers thought it could. We did not. The French Secretary for War, justifying himself later in print, remarked that ' quatre opérations partielles ' after the latest pledge (May 4) were undertaken by the French Army during May. He argued these were more important than the remaining British operations during that month, the French suffering 28,000 deaths against the British 26,000, and taking 8600 prisoners against the British total of 3400. But the British, who had undertaken at the request of Nivelle and the French Government the subsidiary but very strenuous part, could not put forth on the selected front further large operations when the French were whittling away their own offensive gradually to the vanishing point. That would have ill served the Allied cause. It would have ill served the French nation. It had been definitely decided at the conference on May 4-5 at Paris that the British should proceed to large operations in the north. As the Aisne offensive was at an end, it was our business and duty to prepare at once for these northern operations—which had been deferred too long. So that this part of the French Government's defence was unconvincing.

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The fate of Nivelle was sealed after the step taken at the close of April in appointing Pétain as Chief of Staff,¹ with certain powers even over the Commander-in-Chief, and in prohibiting the operations at Brimont. The conference on May 4 made no difference. Mangin had already been removed (May 1) from the command of the Sixth Army, instructed not to reside in the Department of the Seine, and replaced by Maistre. Nivelle himself lingered ineffectively for a fortnight. He still issued orders, and the Fifth, Sixth, and Tenth Armies gained and lost by turns various positions. On May 7, for instance, there was some hard fighting. But

¹ Painlevé likens his position to that of the C.I.G.S. in Great Britain.

it then died away. In truth life had gone clean out of the great enterprise. On May 10 Nivelle was officially informed that 'les méthodes de guerre que proposait le général Pétain paraissait préférables à celles qu'il avait lui-même adoptées et fait exécutées par le général Mangin.' His resignation was asked for. He refused it, and on May 16 was informed that Pétain had been put in his place as Commander-in-Chief of the armies of the north and north-east. So ends the Nivelle period.

It has been absolutely necessary in dealing with these events between February and June 1917 to saddle the politicians, British and French, with their right share of blame. Their errors, with the waste of effort and life which resulted therefrom, were shocking. Still, one ought, in condemning the period, to be strictly fair to those concerned in it. The question may be asked: Were the British War Cabinet and the Government of M. Ribot and M. Painlevé wholly to blame for the total failure of the Aisne scheme and for the misfortunes that followed it? The answer is they were not. They committed, it is true, grave indiscretions, now one civilian power, now another, taking the lead in disastrous counsel. But they had inherited the evil which they increased during these months by their interventions. The mischief started, obviously, when Joffre was removed from his command in December 1916, and the whole of the Chantilly plan, except the Vimy operations which the British Commander-in-Chief insisted on adhering to, was abandoned.

The British War Cabinet cannot be held responsible for that. It is possible that British disparagement of our leadership in the Somme, well known to French generals in the autumn of 1916, and no doubt also to the French nation, had served those who wished to overthrow Joffre and change the command and the whole method of strategy. By indicating our belief in and approval of the conduct of the war in the summer and autumn of 1916 we might have somewhat discouraged our Allies from removing Joffre and Foch, and choosing a new and largely untested leader who at once

proceeded to 'scrap' the Chantilly plans. But, on the whole, this argument is not very convincing. A powerful section of the French, military and civilian, before the close of 1916 was dead-set against Joffre's strategy: and it is probable he would have been displaced whatever line we had taken. The civilian powers who intervened and muddled in 1917 cannot be excused. But the evil started in the previous year when Joffre and Foch were summarily removed from their posts by their own people. That ended, it is now evident, all real prospect of victory for the Allies in 1917 or early in 1918.

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Before leaving the subject, there are two points which should be dealt with, as they closely concerned our leadership at this period. One relates to the arguments in favour of a continuance of the offensive after Nivelle's original plan, having been for over three months in preparation by the Allied Armies, was abandoned: the other to the condition of the French Army at this crisis, which for several months was one of the gravest during the whole struggle on the Western Front. We will first consider the case for a continuance of the offensive after Nivelle's change of plans on April 27.

Between December 1915 and May 1917 in discussions between the military leaders on the Western Front the question of Russia was constantly to the fore. Joffre and Haig, in making their arrangements, before and after the attack on Verdun, consistently thought of Russia and of Italy, and discussed how we could best work in our plans of campaign with those Allies. It was remarked bitterly by some critics of Joffre indeed that he thought so much of the Germans attacking the Russians he forgot they might attack the French. This was short-sighted criticism, Russia being in 1916 still a mighty factor in the war. Rightly was the Russian question in the thoughts of the two leaders in those days. This applies to the whole of 1916. Russia was in the thoughts of Joffre and Haig when at Chantilly they agreed on a plan of operations for 1917. Joffre and

the French generally, as we have seen, wanted a very early offensive, and that would have prevented a great simultaneous move by the Allies, as neither Russia nor Italy would be ready to strike in February 1917. They wished for a very early stroke because of their experiences at Verdun in February 1916. They feared that if the Allies in the west did not take the initiative very early in 1917 the Germans might launch against France some second Verdun. However, though a February offensive would be premature as far as Russia was concerned and would interfere with simultaneity, the French leader, like the British, was in other respects mindful of our eastern and southern Allies. He wished for a scientific co-ordination of the four great Allied Powers—France, Great Britain, Russia and Italy. There was a type of fool, familiar here and probably in France too, which could not believe that any military plans were scientifically thought out on the Western Front between 1914 and 1918. Depending on odds and ends of information, inconsecutive and erroneous, and absorbed from loose talk and print, he believes that we merely hit haphazard till the summer of 1918. The fact that we won in 1918, and did not win in 1916 and 1917, got such a grip of this type that it was useless trying to inform him. Those who are really familiar with the discussions and negotiations between the Allied chiefs on the Western Front in the latter years of the war perceive that the military situation as a whole was most carefully and scientifically studied by Joffre and Haig in 1916.

Were Russia and Italy studied, if anything, too much by the military leaders between December 1915 and April and May 1917? The reply must be absolutely in the negative as far as the greater part of this period is concerned. Russia's aid in the early part of the war was invaluable. The British Commander-in-Chief is certainly one of those leaders who fully acknowledge this. We could not have come alive through 1914 and 1915 without Russia. Her aid was sterling, too, in 1916. Joffre and Haig were right to plan their offensive of that year with a view to working in with Russia.

Equally, they had to remember the eastern theatre when at Chantilly in December 1916 they formed their plans for the 1917 general offensive ; though, as we have seen, the French expectation of a very early attack by the Germans in France urged Joffre to try to strike in 1917 before Russia could possibly be ready, and that was somewhat a flaw in the Chantilly scheme.

But what of this consideration as to Russia when we reach the spring of 1917 ? In April and early May 1917 the British, both military and civil powers, together with, on the French side, Nivelle and the more combative French military leaders such as Mangin, urged that we must continue a hard-striking offensive in order, for one thing, to serve, indeed to save, Russia. She was in the throes of revolution, but her new Government was striving to be true to the Allied cause. If we retired from the offensive on the Western Front, fell back on petty operations, we must expect to lose her support altogether.

Was this argument conclusive in the light of what happened soon afterwards in Russia ? The revolution, taking—invariably—a more violent form in the summer of 1917, soon rendered Russia useless to the Allies. After July 1917 she did not count from a military point of view. But as long as her Government under Kerensky adhered to the Allied cause, and she had an army to strike with, the British and French military chiefs had to consider her in their plans, and, if necessary, make some sacrifice for her. They were bound in honour and in some degree, if a rapidly lessening one, in self-interest. Thus their argument, which was pressed in the spring of 1917, that a continuance of the offensive was necessary, among other reasons, for the aid and encouragement of Russia was genuine and sound.

It was sound, too, as regards Italy. The Italians started their own offensive in June and struggled on through the summer of 1917. They would not have done this if, in the spring of 1917, the British, as well as the French, had ceased the offensive and restricted themselves for the rest of the year to small operations. In October 1917 the

Second Italian Army collapsed, and the disaster of Caporetto followed. But it is a question indeed whether that would have happened if both Allies on the Western Front had continued to strike hard through the summer and into the autumn of 1917. The Germans would not have been free to send divisions to the help of Austria, and Caporetto was owing to German support on the Italian front.

To return to Russia. The military leaders cannot be blamed for not foreseeing the complete collapse of Russia and her uselessness henceforth as an Ally. In this matter they would naturally look for guidance to the heads of the Allied Governments and they would shape their military plans accordingly. Unfortunately the guidance was defective. The British War Cabinet was wrong in its estimate of the value of the Russian Revolution. It seems to have overlooked the elementary fact that the revolution sprang from other causes than sinister German movements in Russia. It was a mighty social and economic upheaval with origins deep in the past, and purely Russian. The Germans could, and did, utilise the Russian Revolution. On the other hand, no thoughtful mind would suppose they could create it. But our War Cabinet took the line that by revolution we had only to get rid of the German element, and then Russia would be far more valuable to us than she had been since the war started. Accordingly they welcomed the revolution as a beneficent 'war-winner.' They praised it. They crusaded for it. An examination of speeches by various heads of our Government in the spring of 1917 can leave us in no doubt about that. Those speeches make a very humiliating page in the history of British politics. The British War Cabinet has just been praised without reserve for its action and speech in April and May 1917 in regard to the continuance of the offensive. But what honest mind can praise its judgment as to Russia in the spring and summer of 1917? On March 19, 1917, the British Prime Minister declared the Government was confident that 'these events . . . will result not in any confusion or slackening in the conduct of the war, but in closer

and more effective co-operation between the Russian people and its Allies in the cause of human freedom!' On March 22, 1917, in the British Government's message to Prince Lvoff, the revolution was proclaimed as 'the greatest service . . . yet made to the cause for which the Allied peoples have been fighting since August 1914'! Finally, as late as November 12, 1917, the British and the French Prime Ministers had hopes of Russia. The former declared 'she is making a great struggle and through fluctuations she is winning her way to steadier and cleaner health than she has ever yet enjoyed.' The latter declared that a revolutionary Russia must always be a menace to the Hohenzollerns. In one way, however, he was right: for Ludendorff, whilst he welcomed the revolution as bringing with it the collapse of Russia, profoundly distrusted the revolutionists and feared the effect of their propaganda on his forces. As to Bolshevism he was under no illusion there: we shall see, later, how he treated it in 1918.

By the way, one member of the British War Cabinet had actually not given up all belief in Russia even as late as March 7, 1918. Mr. Bonar Law on that date, in the House of Commons, still held out to M.P.'s some hope. *Hansard* should be consulted in this matter by those who cherish forlorn hopes.

The War Cabinet, it is true, could not oppose the revolutionists. But by thus crusading for them, Ministers were—to put it mildly—indiscreet.

The military leaders, French and British alike, judged better. Their attitude was restrained and dignified. The desire of Nivelle and of Haig was to stand staunchly by the Russian Army in the time of its need.

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We turn last to the state of the French troops at the time the Aisne offensive was abandoned. Nivelle and Mangin believed the way to restore the moral of their army was boldly to continue the offensive; and those French soldiers and writers who share this view insist that the grave trouble in the French Army, which occurred in May 1917 and onwards, was due to the action of the French Government in

dismissing Nivelle and ending the offensive. There is something in this, but it should not be exaggerated. Vigorous fighting through the summer of 1917 might have served the cause of the French in this matter as well as, or better than, giving way to the malcontents and the spirit of mutiny. It is clear, however, that the moral of a portion of the French Army was not satisfactory when Nivelle started his attack. His own complaints in January and February 1917 plainly point to this. Even admitting that the failure of April 16-17 in the Aisne battle was due considerably to insufficient artillery preparation, etc., and bad tactics, the fact remains that some units behaved ill. The II^e Corps Colonial, whose objective, to start with, was the famous Vauclerc plateau, retired precipitately on the Sixth Army front. The enemy's first line¹ was captured on the opening day of the attack, as we have seen, but nothing to speak of was accomplished, then or later, against the second line. As for the main German positions—which according to plan were to be overrun in a matter of hours—they were not touched during the Battle of the Aisne. The breaking off of the offensive and the humiliation inflicted on the French Commander-in-Chief may have served the purpose of 'defeatists' at the base, and helped to lower the moral of the French troops. But on the other hand French Ministers and their military supporters feared that, if Nivelle remained and a wearing-out battle took the place of the original plan, the French Army would go to pieces. We must be fair to Painlevé, Ribot, and their group, though we dissent from their methods. There is not the smallest reason to suppose their motives were unpatriotic.

Before the offensive was stopped, before it was modified with a view to disengage Reims, the French Army suffered from disillusionment. The troops had gone into battle with extravagant hopes—believing that this was the last effort in the war, and that victory and peace were coming swiftly. When, within a day or two, these hopes vanished, the effect on the military moral was bad.

¹ i.e. the first line of the first enemy position.

The evils Nivelle had complained of in the winter ; the disillusionment of the troops when it was known, by the second day of the Aisne battle, that the Nivello scheme was a failure ; the complaints that the preparations for the attack had been insufficient ; the humiliation of the leader and the abandonment in May of a big offensive—no doubt all these things together affected gravely the condition of the French Army.

Whether it could have gone on fighting on a considerable scale through the summer and into the autumn may be an open question. With the evidence we now have, the view of Mangin and others that it could have done so is not easy to adopt. According to some French writers, the French Army, having been carefully attended to by Pétain, was quite restored by the close of June. Its operations during the remainder of the year do not point that way. Those operations were skilful and successful in the strictly limited objectives aimed at. But compared with a real offensive, they were trifling. In August 1917 General Guillaumat took Mort-Homme and Hill 304 near Verdun. In October 1917 Maistre won his success at Malmaison, his total casualties being under 8000. But except as restoratives of moral, these small operations were really not of great consequence. They had no strategic purpose.

Had the moral of the French Army been wholly restored by the end of June 1917, it is surely not to be believed that France, her military or her political chiefs, would have refrained from carrying out a full offensive against the Germans whilst we were putting out our whole strength in the Flanders campaign between June and November.¹ Had

¹ M. Painlevé has argued that at the close of 1917 the French losses in killed and prisoners amounted to over 1,520,000 men, whilst the British losses were about 700,000 ; therefore it was our rôle, not the French, to shoulder the burden in that year. Even accepting his figures, it would have been unfortunate had the British troops been told in 1917 that they, and not their colleagues in arms, must do the heavy work in that year. Besides, Great Britain's engagements elsewhere, notably at sea, had been of course far larger than the French.

The casualty lists, by the way, of various nations during the war are often conflicting when compared and studied, and are hard to understand.

the French Army been in a condition to engage in even a subsidiary offensive during those months, and to pin down and use up the German reserves, the British would have been able to make a great strategic success of the Flanders campaign. We know from Ludendorff that, even as it was, with the British alone attacking in force the German situation was appalling.

The evidence, however, does not point to the conclusion that by the close of June the moral of the French Army had been completely restored.

Perhaps the worst of the crisis in the French Army—which included mutinies—was over by the end of June. But that is another matter. 'Après l'offensive manquée d'avril et ses effets, toute offensive d'ensemble entamée prématurément et qui n'eût pas pleinement réussi aurait provoqué à nouveau, mais à un état bien plus aigu, et cette fois peut-être irrémédiable, la crise dangereuse qu'avait traversée l'armée en mai et juin 1917.' Thus Painlevé; and we must bear in mind that behind Painlevé was Pétain, the new French Commander-in-Chief. He, on his appointment, undertook a two months' tour through the French front, and, as mentioned in an earlier chapter, addressed officers in over a hundred divisions and devoted himself to restoring discipline. He had urged us, it will be recalled, to continue to attack the enemy in order to give the French troops time to recover. New regulations under his régime were passed giving French soldiers by right ten days' leave every fourth month. As a consequence, we could look for nothing but trifling aid from

In regard to the official French casualty lists of April and May 1917—the period of the Aisne battle—the following figures may be cited: 'Morts sur le terrain, disparus et prisonniers, 61,000. Morts dans les formations sanitaires et hôpitaux de la zone des armées, 10,000. Évacués sur l'intérieur, 110,000. Morts dans les hôpitaux de la zone de l'intérieur, 10,000.' A total of 191,000 casualties. This total consists of 81,000 dead, missing and prisoners, and 110,000 wounded. But the ratio between killed and wounded in modern war is—not counting prisoners—1 to 4 or 5, or 1 to 6 if all lesser casualties are included. These April and May figures, however, seem to indicate a ratio of 1 dead to little more than 1 wounded. It is true the figure 67,000 'morts sur le terrain,' etc., includes prisoners, but surely the army which attacks should take rather than lose prisoners in large numbers.

the French Army during the remainder of 1917; such as the relief of the British as far as the Omignon river, and a little support in Flanders from Anthoine's small French force—against which we took over the Nieuport sector.

To dwell on the mutinies which occurred during the Battle of the Aisne and continued for, at any rate, several weeks after its close, affecting many corps, would be offensive and distasteful. There is, for those who wish to study the matter, a good deal of French literature on the subject by both military and civilian writers, more or less enlightening. It was chiefly produced in order to justify Nivelle and his supporters; but no doubt it can also be advanced as evidence in favour of the opposite section, political and military, which insisted that it was dangerous to the French Army to go on with the battle.

British leadership, in any case, could not be expected in April and May 1917 to know as much about the conditions within that army as French leadership would naturally know: and it did not learn officially about the actual conditions until they were communicated by the new French Commander-in-Chief. So that our leadership cannot be reproached for desiring a continuance of the offensive on a large scale. The French Minister for War has declared that, when we advised its continuance, we were not aware of the state of things.

Though the incident is not one which we have the smallest wish, or right, to dilate on, it cannot be entirely omitted, for, like the Aisne battle, it affected the whole course of the British campaign during the remainder of 1917: and in March 1918 our Army was stinted of the necessary reinforcements with which to meet the German offensive, because it had faced heavy casualties between June and December 1917, largely in order to ward off a crushing attack on the French. Hence the subject can no more be omitted than can the events which led to the collapse at Caporetto in October 1917, through the defection of the Second Italian Army—concerning which Italy's Allies certainly were at no pains to conceal their views and severe criticisms.

CHAPTER XIV

THE OFFENSIVE IN FLANDERS

(By J. H. B.)

As early as November 17, 1916, instructions had been given to the Second Army to be ready at any time to attack the Messines-Wytschaete ridge at a month's notice. In the following March these instructions were confirmed and at the same time the possibilities of an advance towards Langemarck were directed to be studied. When, therefore, in the conferences held at Paris in the first week of May 1917 the decision was arrived at to abandon the Laon-Cambrai offensives and transfer to the British northern front the main effort for the remainder of the year, much in the way of preliminary preparation for these northern operations had already been done. The Second Army was in a condition to complete its arrangements for the Messines battle at short notice, as soon as the transfer of troops, guns, and material from the Arras front could be commenced.

The situation as it was understood by the British at this time was in general terms as follows. The spring offensive had proved disappointing, but even if Nivelle had promised more than he had been able to perform, at least the German Army had been dealt heavy blows and in the short space of a month had lost an unprecedented number of prisoners and guns. It was not really a bad start if the pressure could be continued.¹ While, therefore, the British got ready as rapidly as possible for their northern operations, which were to take the place of Nivelle's now discredited scheme as the main offensive in the west, it was anticipated that the French

¹ Mangin states that the German wastage in this spring offensive was at three times the rate of 1916. *Comment finit la Guerre*, p. 143.

would maintain the battle on their fronts by methodical attacks with the object of wearing out the enemy and using up his reserves. It was not supposed that the French would strike so heavy a blow in support of the main operation by their Allies as the British had struck east of Arras in preparation for the Nivelles attack; but it was hoped that they would keep the battle alive on their fronts, so that the Germans should not be left free to concentrate all their resources to withstand the coming British thrust.

With the same object of occupying the enemy's attention and dispersing his reserves, the Arras battle was not to be allowed to die out altogether. There would be no more general attacks—the demands of the northern battle would forbid that—but activity was to be maintained and ground gained along the First, Third, and Fourth Army fronts by the careful selection of important objectives of a limited nature, deliberate preparation of attack, concentration of artillery, and economy of infantry. Use was to be made of smoke, gas, and other devices to magnify the apparent importance of these operations, and indeed to feign attacks where no attack was to be delivered. In particular the Fourth Army—it should be noted that the Fifth Army was withdrawn from in front of the Hindenburg Line at the end of May and sent north—was to warn troops for an attack on the Flesquières-Havrincourt front and to use every means to convey the impression that an attack there was imminent. The object to be aimed at was to give the Germans the idea that the Arras-Vimy front remained the main front of advance, and that the object of the Messines attack, when it came, was to draw the enemy's reserves away from the real battle. Accordingly it was intended that immediately after the Messines assault had been delivered the attack east of Arras should be renewed in some strength with the aid of troops to be set free by an extension of the French front northwards from the Omignon river to Havrincourt. It was understood well enough that our preparations in the Ypres sector could not escape notice, and that something more than mere demonstrations and local attacks

would be needed on the Arras front if the enemy was to be caused any real uncertainty as to what were our main objects.

In this new situation it will be seen that the respective rôles originally assigned to the French and British Armies were in substance reversed. It had become every whit as important that the British effort should be seconded by continued activity on the French front as it had previously been urgent that the British should aid the French spring battle by powerful and sustained attacks east of Arras. In order to set free French troops for the Aisne offensive the British had taken over, as has been seen, some 30 miles of French line. It was reasonable to expect, now that the positions of the two armies had been interchanged, that the French should take over a substantial part of the British front. The promised extension to Havrincourt, a matter of 21 miles in all, was nothing out of the way. Unfortunately, the French never carried out this intended relief beyond the Omignon river, a matter of 6 miles only, and the troops for the more extensive operations east of Arras after the Messines attack never became available. More unfortunate still, the condition of the French Army after the collapse of the Nivelle offensive rapidly proved to be such that our Allies were not even able to give us the support expected of them in the way of keeping up an effective show of activity on their old battle front. It is clear from Ludendorff's remarks that very little would have been needed to increase an anxiety which he did not cease to entertain, in spite of the almost complete quiescence of the French front.

The facts as to the condition of the French Army during the summer of 1917 are now public property and have been referred to in the previous chapter. Naturally they exercised a powerful influence upon the policy and conduct of the British Higher Command during the remainder of the year. The point which it is desired to emphasise here is the direct effect which the breakdown of the offensive spirit in the French Army had upon British chances of success in

the great task which they had undertaken so late in the campaigning season. The enemy was enabled, with impunity as far as the French were concerned, to mass upon the front of the British attack the whole of his free artillery and to cut down to an absolute minimum the divisions engaged in holding the remainder of his line. In August and October the French were able to take advantage of the German concentration in the north to carry out at Verdun and Malmaison highly successful attacks which, though their objectives were limited, enabled our Allies to gain at light cost localities of considerable tactical importance and to take, as we have seen, some thousands of prisoners. This was all to the good; but far more valuable results might have been achieved had it been possible to use such attacks, not to take local tactical advantage of the German concentration opposite the British, but to prevent such concentration being made and so help the British Army in the greater strategic aim, the freeing of the Belgian coast and the turning of the whole German line from the north.

In the event, the British Armies were to bear the whole burden of the struggle on the Western Front during the remainder of the year. Indeed, after the collapse of Russia and the arrest of the Italian offensive it is scarcely too much to say that they sustained single-handed the contest against Germany. The fighting record for the year of the British divisions is quite extraordinary. Excluding all minor operations, of which there were a great number on all parts of the front during the entire year, the average number of engagements fought by the 62 British infantry divisions works out at 3·8 attacks per division. Only troops of the highest quality could have stood so severe and prolonged a strain. The British started fighting on the Ancre in the first week of January. From that date until the middle of December there was practically continuous fighting on some part or other of the British front, included in that fighting being five major operations—counting the capture of Hill 70

and the fighting around Lens as a single operation—of which one was a wearing-out battle lasting three and a half months under extraordinarily trying conditions. The French offensive operations started on April 16 and ended in the first week of May—except for the support of Anthoine's Army on a two-division front in the flooded country on the left of the British Ypres attacks, and the isolated operations at Verdun and Malmaison in August and October.

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The reasons which led the British Commander-in-Chief to consider that the Arras front was not a favourable locality for a continued offensive once the French offensive had definitely broken down have already been considered. There were equally powerful objections to the choice of any other front except that actually selected in Flanders. To the south of the Arras battle, our communications across the wide expanse of devastated country were not yet sufficient to maintain a big offensive, or to enable us to follow up a break-through should one be effected by surprise. Moreover, nothing less than a properly staged attack could be expected at that time to be successful against so powerful a system as the Hindenburg Line. We had not yet a sufficient number of tanks for an operation such as that carried out at Cambrai in November, even had adequate communications existed. North of the Arras front, it was our intention to maintain the threat to Lens, and indeed everything was ready for the capture of that town by the Canadian Corps when towards the end of October it was decided to send the Canadians to Passchendaele ; but the capture of Lens, useful perhaps as propaganda, led to no big military advantage, while the constant threat served to keep strong German forces collected there for its defence. The whole of the mining and industrial tract from the neighbourhood of Lens northwards to the Lys is so broken up with towns and continuous lines of houses that the development of a big offensive there would have been as difficult as in the Argonne. Preliminary preparations for an attack on the Aubers ridge,

the capture of which would have been a tactical gain, had indeed been included in the original programme for the year, but such a limited operation would not have served the purposes of the British Army at this date. This central sector, held by the First Army, showed indeed the least movement of any part of the British line during the war. No part of it shifted very greatly by comparison with the remainder of our line, and it included the only sector of the British front, that immediately south of the La Bassée Canal, which from the commencement of trench warfare to the autumn of 1918 never moved at all.

The Flanders sector, therefore, was clearly indicated by process of exclusion; but in addition it had positive advantages which admitted of no doubt that, if the British were to undertake any further offensive, it would have to be delivered on the Ypres front. Our position at Ypres was tactically about as bad as it could be, and only the strongest political and moral factors had induced us to remain in it so long. Overlooked from the north, east, and south, no part of the salient was safe from the enemy's guns, which searched our trenches with all the advantages of direct observation. At night our troops in the salient could see the curving line of German Very lights stretching away westwards on either side of them to flank and rear till it appeared that they must be surrounded, and day and night they were exposed to a murderous fire. When the Fifth Army took over the salient at the end of June 1917 its weekly casualties for the three weeks *prior* to the opening of its preparatory bombardment averaged over 2100. A selection of normal quiet weeks in 1916 prior to the opening of the Somme offensive gives over 1800 as the average weekly casualties of the Second Army in ordinary quiet times. The capture of the semicircle of high ground that from Wytschaete to Pilckem, backed by the main line of ridge beyond at Passchendaele, dominated the Ypres plain would effect an immense tactical improvement in the Flanders situation. This very fact involved another advantage of a more general character, namely, that the enemy would unquestionably fight for these

positions; whereas on the Arras front, if not elsewhere, there was always the possibility that he might seek to evade our prepared attack by a timely withdrawal to a new line.

We did not want to miss our blow as we had so nearly done in the spring. Throughout 1917 the Allied policy, and especially the British policy, was to force a military decision quickly, lest we should be forestalled by the success of the German submarine campaign. The German policy was equally to postpone a decision on land, first till the submarine campaign had taken effect, and second till the German forces in Russia had been brought over to the west. The Germans did not believe at this date that American help could be effective, and the Allies feared it might come too late. The successes of the German submarines during 1917 represented a great peril and were, as is well known, the cause of deep and increasing anxiety. They provided a new and most potent argument for the Flanders offensive. Our Admiralty was nervous even about our cross-channel communications. For this reason if for no other it was highly desirable to clear the Flanders coast and put an end to German submarine bases there. This was one big strategic advantage possessed by the Flanders operation, but there was another of a more purely military sort. If our flank could be made to rest on Holland we could shorten our communications, and without greatly lengthening our battle line turn the whole German position in France. The key to the strategic situation of the German armies in the west was always the Liège gap, the narrow bottle neck between the northern limits of the Ardennes forest region and the southern frontier of Holland, through which ran the great trunk railway to Cologne and Westphalia. From the neighbourhood of Liège there opened out like the rays of a fan the different lines of railway that fed the great mass of the German Armies from the Aisne to the Channel. By these railways came food, guns, ammunition, material, and reinforcements, and by them, if the Allies were successful, the main German Armies would have to retreat,

There were two ways of striking at Liège. The one method was that actually employed in 1918, which will be described in detail in due course. In 1917 it was ruled out partly by the want of communications across the devastated area west of the Hindenburg Line and partly by the fact that it needed the co-operation of powerful and sustained offensive operations by the French. It was believed that with our new tactics, and granted reasonable weather conditions, we could always win ground from the enemy ; but if the Germans were left free to concentrate the bulk of their resources in the west against us, our advance would necessarily be slow. The distance from the St. Quentin-Arras front to Mauberge, where the main German lateral railways joined the trunk line, was too great to be covered by these deliberate methods in any reasonable space of time, while the great bulge created by such an unsupported advance would unduly lengthen our battle front and thereby lead to a fresh slackening of our advance. The time was not yet ripe for such an operation.

The second method of threatening the Liège gap was to approach it from the north-west. The distance from the Yser to the Dutch frontier is only 30 miles. It was not too much to expect that under ordinarily favourable conditions and even though unsupported by powerful attacks elsewhere, we could by deliberate methods push our advance sufficiently far across this narrow tract of country to bring the rest of it under the fire of our guns, thereby compelling the enemy to withdraw from the coast and readjust his front. Not merely could the communications of our armies with England be rendered secure and a heavy blow struck at the submarine campaign, but Nieuport and Ostende would become freely available for the supply of our fighting front, the length of which would scarcely be increased. In contrast with this improvement in our own communications, as our advance progressed we should cut across the communications of first one sector and then another of the German front in the north, compelling the enemy to make a succession of withdrawals to the south of us, each one of which would tend to

shorten the line we had to hold. There was no other plan possible at this time that offered a tithe of these advantages.

The problem of the attack on this front had been the subject of study from an early period in the war, and, as has been seen, special consideration had been given to it in this year even before the launching of the Arras offensive. The first step was obviously the capture of the German salient formed by the Messines-Wytschaete ridge, so as to deny the enemy observation into those few slight irregularities of ground in the Ypres salient which afforded cover from view from the east and would be required as battery positions for our main attack east of Ypres. The attack of June 7, delivered it will be noted exactly one month—the scheduled time—after the decision to undertake the northern offensive, presents few special features that are not dealt with in the official despatch.¹ It was a perfect example of the deliberate attack with limited objectives that Nivelle had employed with such effect at Verdun in the winter of 1916, but with, from the British point of view, certain improvements in the way of mines and the use of tanks and instantaneous fuses. It afforded another and entirely successful example of the leap-frogging of divisions, three divisions, the 4th Australian, 11th and 24th Divisions, which did not take part in the opening assault, being passed through the assaulting divisions for the attack on our final objectives. The enemy knew from our preparations, which we could not hope would escape his notice, that the attack was coming; but he decided to endeavour to hold the position and believed he could do so.

On our side, there was at one time some anxiety lest the enemy should evacuate the salient at the last moment. Though the immediate object of our attack was a purely tactical one, limited to the capture of the German positions

¹ There is an error in the footnote to Dunt's edition of the Despatches, p. 107, which I wish to take this opportunity to correct. Major-General C. D. Schute was temporarily in command of the 19th Division at the date of this attack, and, for this attack only, his name should be substituted for that of Major-General G. T. M. Bridges as commander of that division.

on the ridge, it was not desired that the enemy should escape merely with the loss of these positions and without the moral shock of defeat in battle and the loss of prisoners and guns. Prisoners of the 2nd and 119th German Divisions taken on the days immediately preceding our assault helped to remove any fears on that score. It seemed clear that the enemy was again trusting to the strength of his old-established defences and indeed, apart from the fact that his ration parties had great difficulty in getting up and the front-line troops were in consequence reduced to living on their iron rations with very little to drink, that his troops were not suffering excessively from our bombardment. There were even stories of a gathering of 'Sturm Truppen' at Comines that might presage a counter-attack. Additional guns¹ had been brought up and put in position—but without firing, so that their position might not be disclosed to us—and ammunition was being saved up for the critical moment. It was afterwards found that the bulk of the German artillery had been withdrawn to the flanks, where it was hoped that it would be safe from capture, and would be able to enfilade our new positions. In all, there were six German divisions in line on the front of our attack, with another four divisions believed to be in reserve.² The enemy, therefore, was holding his positions in considerable strength, though not in a strength sufficient to withstand a carefully prepared attack by nine British divisions in first line supported by three divisions in second line.³

¹ The number of German guns per German division on the battle front was estimated by us at about 90 immediately prior to the attack, as compared with about 65 during the previous two months.

² The 196th (Prussian) Division, 204th (Württemberg) Division, 36th (Prussian) Division, 2nd (Prussian) Division, 40th (Saxon) Division, 4th (Bavarian) Division, in line. In reserve: the 11th (Silesian) Division, 23rd Reserve (Saxon) Division, 3rd (Bavarian) Division, 24th (Saxon) Division.

³ As an example of the information supplied to the French public concerning the achievements of the British Armies in France, it is instructive to refer to the description of this battle given by General Vorreux in his book, *La Bataille des Flandres en 1917* (pp. 24 and 25). He states that the front of attack was 8 kilometres; it was nearly 16 kilometres. He describes the assault as carried out by Ulstermen and Australians, pre-

It is interesting to compare the artillery preparation for this attack with that for the Arras battle, the figures for which are given on p. 263 above. The length of front of the Messines-Wytschaete attack was rather less than 17,000 yards, or rather more than 8000 yards less than the Arras battle front. On this front of between 9 and 10 miles in the inclusive period of 8 days from May 31 to June 7 2374 guns fired no less than 92,264 tons of ammunition. This represents 1 gun to every 7 yards of front and $5\frac{1}{2}$ tons of ammunition to every yard of front. The Arras figures similarly expressed work out at 1 gun to rather less than 9 yards of front and slightly more than 3 tons of ammunition to every yard of front. The concentration of artillery fire at Messines was enormous, and there must further be taken into consideration the tremendous shock effect of the simultaneous explosion of 19 mines containing nearly 470 tons of high explosives, the discharge in the course of our preparations of 70 tons of gas, and the co-operation in the attack itself of a number of tanks. It is scarcely surprising that our infantry assault swept all before it. This, however, does not diminish the splendour of the achievement. Rarely if ever has more admirable thoroughness in the arrangements

ceded by a new form of tank, more rapid and more powerful than that of the Somme. The tanks were certainly an improved type in many ways, but not in speed or armament, and they could not keep up with our infantry. These troops, according to General Verreaux, found themselves confronted by the 3rd Bavarian Division of Sixte von Armin's Fourth German Army which, he gravely recounts, after endeavouring to disengage itself by an unsuccessful counter-attack, contented itself with leaving rearguards in the fortified woods 'with which the region is studded,' and under their protection withdrew the bulk of its forces to a second position (it was the fourth, the Warneton Line), prepared in advance! Not a word about any other German division! As will have been seen in a previous footnote, the 3rd Bavarian Division, which Verreaux describes as having opposed unaided the attack of an entire British Army composed of Ulstermen and Australians and as having withdrawn from the contest with the honours of war, was in reserve at the time. General Verreaux concludes his account of the day by remarking that, night having fallen, the attackers stopped their advance, after having '*dépassé la route d'Ypres à Messines.*' They *had* passed beyond this road—by about a mile and a half! At the end of such a description one is not surprised to be told that the operation had no strategic importance.

for a battle been rewarded by more excellent results. Care and forethought were not confined to the more technical services. The training of the infantry was equally complete. In particular, a large model of the entire Messines-Wytschaete ridge was made, accurate to scale and showing every detail of the ground and of the German defences on it. Infantry and tank crews were given opportunities to study on this model the actual courses they were to take in the attack, and make notes of the different obstacles they would have to meet and overcome. The result was that the infantry attack went ahead so fast that it outpaced the tanks, and until our final objectives were reached it was only here and there, where particularly stout-hearted groups of the enemy held out in the more distant strong points, that the tanks were able to arrive in time to be of real assistance.

The nature of the operation, of course, favoured the methods employed. There was no idea of 'breaking through' and opening up a field for exploitation. The limits of our advance were fixed, and consequently within those limits every detail could be provided for. For the first time in a major operation, every yard of ground comprised in our objectives was taken within a matter of hours from the launching of our assault. Indeed, practically every yard was captured in accordance with the prearranged time-table. There was no intention on June 7 to go farther than the Oosttaverno Line, or at any time afterwards prior to the launching of our main offensive to do more than give a sufficient depth to our defence of this line. There was little object in pushing on into the angle formed by the convergence of the Lys river and the Ypres-Comines canal, and such an advance would carry our infantry farther than our guns could conveniently cover them. The eastern slopes of the ridge are long, gradual, and for the most part open. In view of the probability of the enemy pursuing his plan of defence by counter-attack, it was important that our infantry should not progress beyond a line which our guns could protect with their barrage from suitable covered positions. Strong German counter-attacks were expected,

and in the late evening of June 8 the report ran that the enemy was in fact counter-attacking violently all along the line. Fire was opened on our side, and if indeed the enemy attacked, he did not succeed in crossing the zone swept by our artillery and machine guns. The story of the repulse of this counter-attack was sent back to the Second Army, and by them duly forwarded to G.H.Q. It now forms part of the history of the battle, but whether an organised German counter-stroke on the scale reported did, in fact, take place, is, it is believed, more than doubtful. Be that as it may, precautions to deal with a very possible event had been taken, and our men were ready, even expectantly ready! One day, no doubt, the matter will be cleared up from the other side.

There was another advantage that this battle enjoyed over most others, whether fought by us, by our Allies, or by our enemies. There was none of that sickening mounting up of casualties at the very end of the fighting so generally characteristic of the concluding stages of a great battle. In all the big efforts to break through, by whomsoever attempted, there came a time when the decision had to be taken whether all that was possible had been achieved, or whether a final effort might not yet overturn the tottering wall of the enemy's defence. It is probably the most difficult of all decisions that the commander of an army is called upon to take. According to racial or individual characteristics, the instincts of the gambler on the one hand, or on the other a stubborn reluctance to admit that the realisation of well-laid plans has become impossible, are alike liable to urge the continuance of the struggle beyond the point where the results attainable are in proportion to the cost. Yet if too great timidity, lack of resolution, or fear of responsibility causes a leader to abandon his enterprise too soon, the whole of the previous effort and sacrifice of his troops are wasted, and a task which a little greater courage or energy might have brought to a victorious conclusion has to be begun again from the commencement. It needs a thorough knowledge of the quality and capacity of one's own troops, a nice

appreciation of conditions on the enemy's side, a sound judgment upon the general situation in all theatres, and a wise balancing of probabilities to enable a commander to come to a correct decision. Courage and determination must be tempered by prudence and foresight ; yet, because war is compounded of risks and wedded to uncertainty, the leader who takes the bold and active course, and so keeps in his own hands the initiation and direction of events, is the more likely to be ultimately successful. A certain mounting up of casualties in proportion to results achieved is therefore inevitable at the end of any hardly fought battle that aims at a decision and has not actually attained it. It is the only test of the facts of the situation. To shirk the test is to abandon the initiative prematurely and court failure as surely as, if more slowly than, would be done by the most obstinate and blind refusal to discontinue the attack. To have given up the Somme battle before the comparatively unprofitable fighting of the middle and latter half of October would have been to abandon the struggle at the very moment when, as is now known, the resources of the German Army were at their lowest ebb. To have persisted in November, as Joffre would seem at one time to have wished us to do, would have been to have thrown away troops in a hopeless battle with the elements.

The Flanders struggle now opening was governed by these considerations, but also in its latest stages, as will be seen, by others of a somewhat different nature. While retaining tactically its original offensive character, long before its close it had begun to assume strategically something of the nature of a defensive operation. On the one hand was the purely local and tactical object of attaining a satisfactory line for the winter ; on the other, an object of far wider and more general moment, namely, a peculiarly urgent need at this period of keeping the initiative in our hands till the campaigning season was safely over. At Cambrai in an operation of much less extensive aims the bold course came within an ace of success, but the risk proved too great and the event showed that it would have in fact been better,

after the first failure to take Bourslon, had we withdrawn at once to the Flesquières ridge and settled down there for the winter. Yet the risk was one that any resolute commander would have taken. Ludendorff took bigger risks in the spring of 1918, and if that be not accepted as justification of the British action at Cambrai—for after all Ludendorff failed—the British Commander-in-Chief, nothing daunted, took, as will be seen, bigger risks twice in the summer and autumn of 1918, and by his wise courage in taking them shortened the war by a year.

Apart from the big decision to be taken by the Commander-in-Chief as to whether an offensive can profitably be persisted in or whether the utmost that can be expected from it, except at disproportionate cost, has already been gained, there occur in the course of the different stages of a wearing-out battle a number of decisions of a similar character to be taken by local commanders, as to whether the exploitation of each successive step in the advance has been carried as far as it can be with profit to the attacker. These smaller decisions equally require great nicety of judgment, and, depending largely upon local considerations, can as a rule be controlled only in very general fashion from above. Insistence upon the correct policy to pursue cannot wholly avoid mistakes in its application, whether in the direction of a too ready discouragement, such as was responsible for hanging up the attack on Mametz Wood, or in that of an excessive and headstrong obstinacy, such as on different occasions led to the too hasty repetition of attacks—without substantial change of plan—upon localities which had already successfully resisted more powerful and better prepared assaults. If in a general review of our several offensive operations there can be discovered as regards both the smaller and the larger of these problems a tendency to err rather on the bolder side, this was, within limits, undoubtedly the better course. Neither problem arose, however, in the Messines attack. Our objects were attained in the first great forward bound, and such minor affairs as took place on this front during the succeeding six weeks were designed

merely to keep the enemy employed and to that extent perplex him as to the exact location of our next drive.

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The six weeks following the Messines battle were in some respects the most tantalising of the whole year. The weather was ideal for Flanders campaigning, and as one fine day succeeded another, the thought of what might have been accomplished in them had the northern operation been commenced earlier alternated in one's mind with the anxiety lest the weather should break before we were ready, and a splendid opportunity be lost. One was conscious, moreover, that the delay was giving the enemy time to pull himself together again, to gauge our plans and prepare to meet them. It was indifferent consolation to know that now, at least, no time was being wasted, but that the necessary preparations for the big attack were being pushed forward with the utmost energy. On June 10 the Fifth Army took over command of our front from Observatory Ridge northwards with the IInd, XVIIIth, and XIVth Corps and arrangements for the coming struggle were pushed on, with all the speed possible, having regard to our resources and the magnitude of the task in front of us. Yet the feeling persisted that we were marking time in the midst of the best fighting period of the year, and that when at length our preparations were completed the space left to us to accomplish our aims would be perilously short.

Certainly, everything possible was done to maintain the activity of our whole front and especially of the old Arras battle front. While the Second Army was still pushing its outpost line eastwards from the Oosttaverne positions and occupying ground evacuated by the enemy on the right flank of our attack, on the Third Army front the 3rd Division launched a surprise assault without a barrage at 7.20 A.M. on June 14 and in the course of a few minutes captured the German positions on Infantry Hill east of Monchy-le-Preux, with 175 prisoners. The complete success of this attack and the novel tactics employed contrast with our previous unsuccessful efforts on more stereotyped lines to take these

same positions. Next day the 58th Division, Vth Corps, attacked the section of the Hindenburg Line north-west of Bullecourt. On the 17th local fighting of an obstinate character in this sector spread to the 21st Division front, VIIth Corps. Some 50 prisoners were taken and substantial progress made. On June 19 the 46th Division took up the game on the First Army front, capturing some 800 yards of German trench north of the Souchez river, with some 40 prisoners. Another 400 yards of trench were taken by the same division in the late evening of June 24, and the same night the 6th Division carried out a mock raid west of Hulluch in which 1000 dummies were exposed, drawing a heavy hostile barrage.

Towards the end of this month, the First Army front about Lens became very active. On the 25th and 26th, the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions and the 46th Division all made progress in this sector. On the night of the 27th-28th the 6th Division had another successful dummy raid west of Hulluch. Thermit, smoke, gas, and dummies were used to simulate attack at different points on the whole front between the Scarpe and La Bassée, and south of Lens Canadian patrols reached Avion. Next night in conjunction with other demonstrations the 31st and 5th Divisions delivered a real attack on a front of 2000 yards opposite Oppy, capturing all their objectives and 200 prisoners. Troops of the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions and of the 46th Division carried out smaller but equally successful attacks south-west and west of Lens, the total number of prisoners taken in these different attacks and in the raids carried out in conjunction with them exceeding 330. The 46th Division continued to make progress on June 30 and July 1. By this time the enemy had obviously become alarmed and was developing a very obstinate defence. There is little doubt, both from his actions and from his published reports at this time, that he thought that he was being seriously attacked by the First Army on a wide front.

Meanwhile, on the Third Army front, constant activity prevailed on both sides of the line, sharp local attacks being

made by the enemy as well as by our own troops ; but the more considerable operations which we had hoped to undertake on this front with the troops to be set free by the extension of the French left from the Omignon river to Havrincourt had necessarily to be abandoned when it was found that the French were unable to carry out this relief.

One of the reasons put forward by our Allies to explain their unwillingness to carry out the desired extension of their front was that French troops were going to take part in the Flanders offensive. The reason was not altogether a satisfactory one. In the first place, French participation in the Flanders offensive had not been sought and was not in fact desired by the British. On the contrary, it was forced upon the British by the French, in order to satisfy the national pride of our Allies and also, it may be in part, in order that the French Armies might be heartened by the knowledge that French troops were taking part in a successful offensive. It was probably felt by our Allies that after the high hopes of French victory with which the year had started, French military prestige at home and abroad would suffer if they had no share in what was clearly to be the main offensive operation of 1917.

The British were ready enough to meet them on this point, and any reluctance our leaders may have felt at the prospect of a joint operation was based not on personal or national motives, but on sound military grounds. Supply arrangements in the Ypres sector were always difficult by reason of the many dykes and canals that cut up the low-lying country and forced all heavy traffic along a few main roads built of narrow *pavé*. Communications would be vastly complicated by the interpolation of a French army between the British and Belgian forces. Moreover, the military assistance offered would add very little to the weight of the coming attack. The sector allotted to the First French Army consisted of a series of 'peninsulas' formed by the dipping down of the last of the low-lying Flanders ridges into the area of the inundations. The advance of the Fifth British Army across

the basis of these tongues of water-sodden ground would turn them successively into islands, so far as the enemy was concerned, and make the position of the garrisons of the scattered German posts by which they were defended an impossible one. The task to be performed by the First French Army, therefore, and later, as the advance made greater depth, by the Belgian forces on their left, was little more than to occupy these tongues of land as the enemy withdrew from them. Our Allies discharged this task with complete success and with notably light casualties, but it was not a task for which the services of a special French army were required. On the left of the French Army, the Belgian forces showed themselves entirely adequate to their share of this amphibious warfare, and from the British point of view, the carrying out of the promised relief of the British forces south of Havrincourt would have been a far more satisfactory way of using the French divisions employed on our left in Flanders. Moreover, the presence of the French in Flanders proved a very definite disadvantage in another and important respect, for our Allies were late in getting their guns forward to their positions for the attack. The result was that the whole operation, already perilously late in the season, was delayed for some days longer in order that French troops which could have been employed elsewhere with much greater profit might complete their arrangements to take part in it. It is admittedly unsatisfactory to argue backwards from events, yet the fact remains that the final break in a comparatively long spell of fair weather took place on the very day of our assault. If there had been no French army acting on our left, we should have had three days of sufficiently fine weather in which to develop the success of our opening attack.

There is a second ground upon which the French explanation of their inability to relieve our right appears to be unsatisfactory. At the very time when we were asking for this relief to be carried out, British troops were taking over the French sector on the sea at Nicuport. Our Allies, therefore, were themselves getting a relief which went some way

towards balancing the troops engaged on the Ypres front. The French had never cared to entrust this dune sector to the Belgians, and from the days of the first great German thrust for the Channel ports it had been held by French troops. The importance of the sector, apart from the fact that if the Germans were able to force the passage of the Yser here they would turn, or threaten to turn, the left of the Belgian Army established behind the inundations, lay in the fact that the position formed a bridgehead on the right bank of the Yser from which an attack might be launched along the coast behind the German right. It was not, however, a very satisfactory bridgehead, for it had not sufficient depth. Some two miles in length, the depth of the position varied from a maximum of about 1200 yards opposite Lombartzyde, where there were substantial bridges across the river and some protection from shell fire in Nieuport, to a mere 600 yards strip of sand dune along the east bank of the Yser between Lombartzyde and the sea. Though the French had occupied the position for three years, there was no adequate overhead protection from shell fire anywhere along this strip, which was connected with the left bank only by light temporary bridges which the first bombardment would destroy. There had been talk, indeed, of constructing a tunnel beneath the Yser which, with concrete cover on the east bank, would have made the position far more defensible ; but nothing had been done, and the only means by which this strip could be defended against serious attack consisted in the defence being able to concentrate in front of it and upon it a weight of artillery fire sufficient to deny it to the enemy. The employment of such a method meant that the troops holding the sand breastworks which formed the French defences east of the river would have to take their chance.

During the three years that the French held this sector, after the conclusion of the fighting of the early months of the war, no attack was made upon it. On July 8, the Fourth British Army assumed control of the coast front, and on July 10 the Germans attacked ! It is not suggested that the

German attack was mounted and delivered in the course of two days. Some three weeks before General Rawlinson took command, the XVth British Corps (Lieut.-General Sir J. P. du Cane) had commenced the relief of the French troops holding the sector, and on the night of June 20-21 the enemy had carried out a raid and obtained identifications near Lombartzyde. The enemy, therefore, had known for some days before July 10 that the British were taking over the coast sector, and our presence there, combined with the great activity behind our lines in the Ypres sector—a circumstance which he could not fail to observe—inevitably aroused his suspicions. The bridgehead which for three years he had been content to ignore had suddenly become a danger, and he at once prepared to get rid of it.

He chose the moment for his attempt remarkably well. It has been said that the only method of defending successfully this narrow strip of polder and dune east of the Yser was by the employment of an overwhelming weight of artillery fire. If the enemy had postponed his attack for another forty-eight hours, the necessary weight of artillery would have been available, and in all probability the attack would have been crushed, just as a subsequent attack on the Lombartzyde positions on July 13 collapsed under the fire of our guns. On the 10th, however, only a part of our artillery was in position, and such batteries as were able to come into action were not sufficient to counter the German guns and at the same time put down an impenetrable barrier of bursting shells in the way of his infantry.

It may well be asked, why did our infantry go into line, exposing themselves to the risk of capture and identification, before our artillery took over from the French, if the defence of the position depended so absolutely upon a superiority in guns? The French had not been attacked for three years, and there was no reason—if our Allies continued to maintain an unprovocative attitude—why the Germans should suddenly depart from a habit so long established. Why did not the British commence taking over the sector with their artillery, leaving the French infantry in the trenches until

the powerful artillery we had allotted to this sector was safely in position? There would have been no need—save in the highly improbable event of the Germans attacking—for the British guns to fire till the infantry relief had also been completed. A few French guns left behind here and there would have been quite enough to preserve the illusion that the sector was still held by French troops only. In any event, a few rounds of British shell might have aroused the enemy's suspicions, but would not necessarily have excited his alarm. Doubtless he would have carried out a few raids, would have found the trenches held by Frenchmen as usual, and for the time at any rate would have gone back with a quiet mind. The raid of June 20-21 in particular would have identified Frenchmen, and no harm would have been done. On the other hand, the presence of British infantry in the trenches was conclusive. It pointed plain as day to an impending attack and made a German attempt to forestall us certain. Why was not the obvious precaution taken of putting the British guns in first?

The short answer is that our Allies would not leave their infantry in the trenches unless they were covered by French guns. Apparently the French infantry would not feel safe with only British guns behind them, while the French artillery were less particular concerning the infantry in front of them. Of course, they had the Yser in front of them too. So our infantry had to go in first, and it was assumed that they would have no qualms about being supported by French artillery. It was a little hard on our gunners! It had disastrous results so far as two gallant British infantry battalions were concerned. The 1st Bn. Northampton Regiment and the 2nd Bn. K.R.R.C., 1st Division, holding the 600 yards wide strip along the right bank of the Yser on July 10 were cut off from retreat or succour by the destruction by the German artillery of the frail footbridges that formed their only means of communication with the western bank. In the whole position the only solid cover against shell fire consisted of a length of concreted tunnel through the dunes which we had commenced

and made some progress with in the short time since we had taken over. Elsewhere, the sand breastworks were flattened out by the German gunfire, and all that were left of our garrison were overwhelmed by the German infantry attack. The assault took place at 6.30 P.M., after a bombardment lasting all day. In the half-completed tunnel a party of our men found shelter from the fury of the bombardment and held out for many hours. During the nights of July 10-11 and 11-12 some 74 of them broke out and swam the Yser to our lines. They were the only survivors.

Already the enemy in the north was fully awake, and the Lombartzyde attack was but one of many signs that he too was getting ready. On June 27 the big 15-inch naval gun at Leugenboom had started firing at Dunkirk, seeking to supplement the efforts of the German bombing 'planes to interrupt our use of the port. The gun caused much interest and excitement, and people with maps got compasses and drew circles centred on Leugenboom to show how many interesting places on our side of the line were included in its extreme range. Advanced G.H.Q. was one of them, but in fact the nearest shell fell some four miles away. At Dunkirk, a telephone message was received from the line whenever the gun was fired, and the inhabitants of the town then hastened to dugouts and cellars, while the huge shell was still speeding towards them.

A yet more unpleasant novelty was in store for us. Two days after the affair at Lombartzyde, Ypres was heavily bombarded with mustard gas. There were 1500 casualties, nearly all of them slight cases but the first of many thousands to come. On the night of July 21-22 great numbers of the new gas shell were fired into Nieuport, causing 2000 casualties.

Mustard gas was an undoubted triumph of German perception and imagination. It was not that the gas was a new one in the sense of being unknown to our chemists. On the contrary, the chemical substance of which it was composed had been made experimentally in our own laboratories, but its military value had not been recognised.

Our chemists had been seeking, and seeking very successfully, for gases that would kill, and they had paid no attention to a gas that could only occasionally prove fatal. The fact was lost sight of that the power to put large numbers of one's enemies out of action at a critical moment, and keep them out of action for some weeks, was nearly as valuable, from the military point of view, as actual killing would be. The Germans saw this, and are entitled to the full credit for their perspicacity. Where lethal gas shell might kill half a dozen men, mustard gas would put, it may be, 50 or 100 temporarily out of action. It was possible so to drench an area with 'mustard oil,' as it was at first called, that the very ground would become tainted with it. Hours after the bombardment, the sun would draw fresh exhalations out of the saturated soil, and a fresh crop of casualties would result. Men turning over the ground, repairing or digging trenches or gun positions, would set free new discharges. The gas soaked into men's clothes, was carried into crowded dugouts and given off in the warmer atmosphere there, causing casualties the origin of which at first could not be understood. It became necessary to provide complete changes of clothes for men returning from areas poisoned by mustard gas. Its effects were peculiarly persistent in towns and woods, where the gas hung about the houses or undergrowth. Ordinary gas precautions were no defence against it. Above all, it opened wide the door to malingering. Before the arrival of mustard gas men had been known to expose a limb, or to shoot themselves through hand or foot in order to get out of the line. How much easier to get an arm or a leg blistered with mustard gas! It was a thing that might happen to anybody, detection was practically impossible, and there was no danger; only a certain amount of discomfort infinitely preferable to the continuing horror of the trenches. Many men must have felt this, doubtless some took advantage of it; but to the eternal credit of the British fighting man, out of the many thousands of casualties caused by mustard or 'Yellow Cross' gas between July 12, 1917, and the Armistice,

the percentage of cases self-incurred was, so far as could be ascertained, exceedingly small.

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Meanwhile, the preparations for the attack continued, and our own gas men were not idle. At 2 A.M. on July 15, 2700 gas cylinder projectors and 3700 gas bombs from Stokes mortars were fired into the German lines along the front of the Fifth Army. On the same day the XIVth Corps on the left of the Fifth Army started in co-operation with General Anthoine's First French Army to bombard the German trenches opposed to them. The great offensive had begun, and a week later the preparatory bombardment proper opened along the whole Fifth Army front.

In the ten days from July 22 to July 31 inclusive on a front of 13,700 yards (the main front of attack) some 2300 guns fired some 65,000 tons of ammunition, or one gun to every 6 yards of front and about $4\frac{1}{2}$ tons of ammunition to every yard of front. The date for the attack was fixed in the first instance for the 25th, but was changed to the 28th because it was found that the enemy had moved his guns to new positions farther back, which had to be discovered and registered under weather conditions that were already deteriorating. Subsequently, at the urgent request of General Anthoine, the assault was again postponed till the 31st to enable the French to complete their artillery arrangements. On the 27th, the day before the second date fixed for the attack, the enemy evacuated his front line positions on practically the whole front of the Fifth Army. Warned by aeroplane reconnaissance, our patrols were sent forward, and only on the XVIIIth Corps front did they find the enemy holding his first system. Later in the day these patrols were pushed back, except on the left where the XIVth British Corps and the 1st French Corps established themselves securely on the east bank of the Yser Canal. One can only guess as yet at the reason for this action by the enemy, but in so far as it solved for us the problem of crossing the canal, it resulted in a very substantial advantage to our attack.

The general plan of the offensive commenced on July 31, 1917, was to strike eastwards from Ypres until we had secured the crest of the main ridge crossed by the Menin road. Then with its right firmly established on the eastern slopes of the ridge, the Fifth Army was to move in a north-easterly and northerly direction along it, the French and Belgians coming into action on the left of the British striking force and covering our flank, until the whole of the area enclosed by the semicircle of higher ground running from the Menin road through Passchendaele, Stadenberg, and Clercken was held by the Allies. If these positions were gained with reasonable celerity, the Fifth Army would develop its thrust with the utmost energy in the directions of Roulers and Bruges in rear of the German forces holding the coast sector. To complete the enemy's discomfiture in this latter area as well as to assist the general movement, the Belgian Army would attack from Dixmude and the Fourth British Army would attack in the coast sector, land and naval forces co-operating. On the right of the main advance and to protect its southern flank against any counter-stroke the enemy might attempt, the Second British Army would move forward to the Lys river. Except, in fact, for the special feature of a combined naval and military operation on the coast, the plan for the later development of the Flanders battle in 1917 bore a close general resemblance to that actually carried out successfully twelve months later by much inferior forces, though under far more favourable conditions.

It is a curious thing that throughout the war there were people who spent a large portion of their time in crying out for the exercise of greater imagination in our military leadership. Their constant plaint throughout the latter part of the Battle of the Somme has already been considered. They seemed utterly regardless of the fact that it was the exercise of this very quality of imagination, uncontrolled by any proper appreciation of ways and means and other commonplace realities, that plunged us into the Antwerp expedition, hurried us into the Dardanelles affair by the

road least likely to achieve success, led to the surrender of General Townshend's gallant but inadequate forces at Kut, was responsible in March 1918 for the absence in Palestine and elsewhere of troops that had they been in France would have saved Gough's Army, and finally wasted men and money to no possible useful purpose at Archangel and Murmansk. One might have thought that even prior to 1918 these examples of riotously imaginative strategy would have satisfied the most enthusiastic for such methods, but the critics concentrated upon France. They wanted to see imaginative strategy there. Yet all the while in France collective imagination was working at high pressure right through the Army, constantly devising better methods and new ways both in small things and in great. It was fruitful in tactics and was never absent from strategy. Only in France imagination was subject to control, and the control was exercised in accordance with a wise experience of military affairs and a just appreciation of what was possible and what was not. The coastal operation that was to form a part of the later stages of the Flanders operations is a striking example of this.

Some time before the opening of the offensive, the 1st Division suddenly developed an acute attack of cerebro-spinal meningitis in a highly contagious form, and retired behind barbed-wire fencing in an unfrequented area of sand dune behind Dunkirk. There the division strove manfully against the disease by novel methods, consisting of prolonged and violent exercise under a hot sun. It became highly skilled in the art of embarking and disembarking from flat-bottomed boats or pontoons and negotiating sea-walls, and astonishingly expert in fighting over low-lying coast land intersected with embankments and dykes. Its officers developed an extraordinary interest in the subject of inundations and a thirst for a detailed knowledge of the configuration of the ground in the coastal sector west of Ostende. The strange cure appeared to be an entirely successful one for, visited a few weeks after their compulsory isolation, all ranks appeared to be as fine and

as healthy a lot of men as one might wish to see. Judged by the demeanour of the G.S.O.1 of the division, the only noteworthy symptom of the disease from which they were reported to be suffering seemed to be a distinctly homicidal tendency, directed with particular intensity against any outsider who might have succeeded without proper excuse in passing the sentries and entering the forbidden area.¹

It need scarcely be explained that the 'meningitis' was of a purely official or rather semi-official character, invented for the benefit of any inquisitive person who might wonder what had become of the 1st Division, and why its sudden disappearance had been made the subject of so much secrecy. Naturally, the authorities would not want it generally known that a virulent disease in a highly contagious form had broken out in the ranks of the Army. Camouflage in war takes many forms. Meanwhile, the 1st Division was training as hard as it could, in conditions similar to those in which it hoped to fight, to fit itself to take part with credit in a piece of strategy as boldly imaginative as any that had ever been devised in war. The fact that a combined operation on the coast by British military and naval forces formed part of the general scheme of the Flanders offensive is now public property and the method of operation has been fully described.² The secret was well kept at the time.

The plan was so daring and the methods so original that, had they then been more generally known, many might have doubted the practicability of the scheme; none could have questioned the qualities of imagination it displayed. Every detail showed the work of keen and fertile imagination, but every detail that a well-informed imagination had inspired was worked out with such thoroughness that nothing was left to chance. Not the least amazing of the strange methods devised, and perfected by practical ex-

¹ In subsequent days the writer found himself associated with this officer for some months and discovered that his natural demeanour, when unaffected by official meningitis, was quite other than that described above. Indeed, he easily won not merely the writer's respect, but his sincere liking.

² See Admiral Sir R. Bacon's *The Dover Patrol, 1915-1917* (Hutchinson), vol. i. p. 229 *et seq.*

periment, for effecting the landing was the proposal that tanks should climb the thirty foot sea-wall which guarded the coast-line west of Ostende against erosion. The slope of the wall, itself sufficiently steep to make the task of scaling it apparently impossible, was capped by a massive rounded coping-stone three feet in height which projected seawards from the face of the wall and overhung the upper part of the slope. Supposing that a tank could climb the initial slope of slippery stone, how could it negotiate the final perpendicular rise? A way was found. An arrangement was made by which the tank could carry in front of it, projecting from its nose, a strong wooden ramp which was shaped to fit into the angle formed by the slope of the sea-wall and the projecting coping-stone, and so continue the slope of the sea-wall evenly to the top. When the tank had climbed up the greater part of the slope and the high end of the ramp had reached the coping-stone, releases were actuated from inside the tank which dropped the ramp, the lower surface of which was furnished with strong steel spikes. The spikes bit into the stone surface of the slope, holding the ramp in position, and the tank then climbed over the ramp to the top of the wall.

During the last part of its climb, the tank presented a spectacle that had to be seen to be fully realised. The final slope formed by the ramp and the sea-wall was so steep that the tank appeared to be standing vertically on end, towering for more than half its length above the level top of the sea-wall. For a long breathless moment it hung swaying, with the whole depth of the thirty foot sea-wall beneath it. Then with a great crash it fell forward. One wondered how the men inside had survived that final crash, and how many times a tank had taken the ramp a little off the straight, and had crashed backwards instead of forwards; and while one wondered, the tank moved solemnly off, took the sloping road which led back to the foot of the practice wall and prepared to go through the hair-raising performance again. What would the German coast-line garrisons have thought when, stunned by the thunderous discharge of 12-inch guns

fired at point-blank range from the vessels escorting the pontoons, they saw rising out of the sea amid the whirling depths of phosphorous smoke a line of ironclad monsters scaling like giant slugs the sea-wall they had thought impregnable ?

Had the scheme been put into effect and by its daring and forethought succeeded, in combination with the northward thrust of the Fifth Army from the Ypres front and the eastward attack of Rawlinson's Fourth Army across the Yser at Lombartzyde, the southward stroke of the 1st Division behind the German lines could scarcely have failed to lead to a great capture of men and guns, to the turning of the seaward flank of the German Armies and the clearing of a great part of the seacoast. Boldness and imagination, however, were in this case controlled by knowledge and common sense. The blow could only be effective as part of a larger and more powerful operation, and accordingly was not to be struck till the general situation was ripe for it. Then its very boldness and its unexpected qualities would go far to guarantee its success.

The situation never did become ripe. So, though as far as the scheme itself was concerned everything was ready, though the last detail of the landing had been worked out and carefully rehearsed, there was never any question of taking an impossible risk, or of trying to create by launching the venture itself the condition precedent upon the existence of which its possibility depended. The scheme was laid aside, and for a little while longer home critics continued to rail against our unimaginative strategy on the Western Front.

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At 5.50 A.M. on July 31—after some severe comment at home for a fortnight or more upon the inactivity of the British Armies in France—the infantry battle in Flanders opened. To give more width to the apparent front of attack, the Second British Army co-operated on the right of the Fifth Army, as well as the First French Army on the left flank. In this way the battle front was extended over a front of fifteen miles from La Basse Ville to Steenstraat,

but the delivery of the main blow was assigned to General Gough's Fifth Army attacking with the IInd, XIXth, XVIIIth and XIVth Corps between the Zillebeke-Zandvoorde road and Boesinghe inclusive.

The plan of attack followed what had now become the normal course, namely, that of an advance by a series of bounds, the progress of our infantry to each successive stage being closely preceded and protected by a moving barrage of exploding shells. The lesson of the Arras fighting, however, had been learnt, and the final line to be reached by our infantry on this day was fixed well within the range of our guns. In this way it was hoped that our artillery would be able to cover the work of consolidation, and break up the counter-attacks which the enemy's methods of defence led us to expect. In so limiting the depth of our attack our purpose in this and succeeding battles was to maintain throughout the first stage of the offensive a methodical and yet steady progression till the desired position had been won, the comparative shallowness of each advance being compensated for by the certainty with which it was made and the rapidity with which a fresh step forward could be undertaken. As a tactical answer to the new German methods of defence, our new system of attack proved a complete success. As a means of breaking through the successive lines of the enemy's defence and leading up to the later stages of the offensive in open country, it failed through no fault of its own. So deliberate a method needed, first, time and secondly fine weather, so that there might be no undue interval between attacks. At the date when the offensive was at last launched, time was already short, but it would have been sufficient had the fine weather held a little longer, or even had the weather for the remainder of the year been normal.

In the first day's operations the Second Army duly completed the short advance allotted to them and by their action undoubtedly lessened the opposition encountered by the Fifth Army during the first stages of the attack. The enemy, however, had concentrated his main powers of resistance

against the apparent centre of the battle front, in defence of the important sector of the main ridge crossed by the Ypres-Menin road. This sector was in fact, both in this and subsequent assaults, on the right flank of the main attack. Looking back on the events of August and September, the course taken by the battle suggests that the assigning of this difficult and most important sector to the flank corps of the Fifth Army was a tactical mistake. The capture of the ridge east of Ypres was vital to the whole scheme of the advance, yet the programme for the opening attacks seems to leave no margin of safety in this locality. The plan was a thought too precise. The point of junction of two armies, even armies of the same nation and under the same supreme command, is always liable to be a point of weakness, no matter how close may be the liaison between the adjoining infantry and artillery units. On the other hand, the flank of a battle is usually the sector that can be most rapidly reinforced by the defending army, for as soon as the limits of the infantry assault are ascertained reserves can be thrown in from the neighbouring units that are not themselves directly threatened, and all artillery within reach can be switched from their own fronts to the front of attack.

The attack of July 1, 1916, was no exception to this, for the success of the French assault south of the Somme was due, as has been seen, to the fact that the enemy was not expecting to be attacked there. The main assault that day was directed against the German positions between the Somme and the Ancre, in the centre sector of the battle front, and it was here that the most important successes were gained. In the Arras offensive, also, the main drive was in the centre astride the Scarpe. Certainly, the Vimy Ridge lay on the northern flank of the battle front, but the attack upon it was carried out almost as a self-contained operation by a single formation, the Canadian Corps, and could claim the whole attention of the First Army. Moreover, the depth of our final objectives on the left decreased steadily as we approached more nearly to the northern limit of the attack; yet it was actually

in the extreme northern sector of their attack, at Hill 145, that the Canadians experienced their only check.

Whatever the cause, in the first day's fighting the only really disappointing feature was on the right flank of the Fifth Army's attack, that is, astride the Menin road. The line of our first objective was gained with ease and comparatively little loss on the whole fifteen-mile front. The Second Army had then completed their programme. The Fifth Army and the First French Army proceeded with the second and subsequently with the third stages of the operation. At the end of the day, the line of advance on the main front of attack had assumed the orthodox crescent form. On the left flank where, as the flooded area was approached, the depth of the Allied objectives decreased naturally and gradually the farther they extended northwards, our whole objectives were achieved and even exceeded, the enemy making little attempt to defend the 'peninsula' area. In the centre they were also achieved, though here the depth of the advance was greater and resistance more serious. On the right flank of the main attack, where our final objectives bulged abruptly eastwards from Shrewsbury Forest to Tower Hamlets, they were not achieved. In this sector, certainly, the natural difficulties encountered were especially great, and the tanks (118 in all went into action on this day) on the IIInd Corps front had to advance along very restricted lines of approach, in the nature of defiles. Many were caught by artillery fire as they moved forward through these defiles, and, though others of them gave useful assistance, for this reason and because also of the holding up of our infantry attack, none of the tanks in this sector in fact reached the ground over which they were intended to operate.

In this IIInd Corps sector, in view of its known difficulty and the depth to which it was desired to penetrate, a part of the 18th Division had been detailed to 'leap frog' through the 30th Division. Where the 18th Division went through, and on the front of the 8th Division on the left of the 18th, our troops were able to make and maintain some small

progress beyond their first objectives. The 8th Division, indeed, got its flank troops forward in touch with the XIXth Corps approximately on the line of our second objectives. The XIXth Corps, after at first reaching their final objectives, were later forced back by counter-attacks to the line of their second objectives, in touch with the XVIIIth Corps, who had reached their third and final objective line, with their right thrown back, however, in conformation with the position of the XIXth Corps. The XIVth Corps not only gained their third line of objectives, but pushed out some distance beyond it and established bridgeheads across the Steenbeek.

No small part of the troubles with which our troops were faced, especially in the southern area where the enemy was in greatest force, was due to the fact that rain began to fall heavily at an early hour of the afternoon and continued for the rest of the day, and indeed for the following four days and nights without intermission. Low clouds made observation from the air impossible, with the result that the advantage expected to be gained from the limiting our infantry advance to a depth that could be covered by our guns was largely lost. The careful arrangements made for bringing our artillery fire down rapidly and effectively upon counter-attacks and other special targets could not be carried out. Chiefly in consequence of this, the powerful counter-attacks with which the enemy, following his Arras tactics, sought during the later stages of the fight to check and then drive back our troops, were not without effect. The measure of success attained by them was naturally greatest on the right of the Fifth Army advance, and on the right centre where the southern flank of the XIXth Corps was left in the air by the holding up of the IIInd Corps.

Despite the fact that on the right our advance had been checked before it had completed its aim, the attack could fairly be regarded as a notable and encouraging success. In the face of such powerful resistance as the enemy, warned of our intentions and holding positions of great strength, had been able to oppose to us, it would have been remarkable

indeed if our objectives had been everywhere completely attained. Over a wide area of the battle front they had not merely been attained but had been exceeded, and even in the sector of least success we had made deep and important progress. The enemy had lost heavily and we had taken 6000 prisoners, while the First French Army had secured another 150 or more. We were fully prepared to encounter fierce opposition, and were prepared beforehand to stop the advance at any of the intermediate objectives if the development of the battle should make that course advisable. The check on the right, therefore, did not seriously disturb our plans. It merely meant that the different steps of our general advance would have to proceed somewhat more slowly in this sector.

The event which did most seriously disarrange our plans was the steady downpour of rain which, as has been stated, continued without sensible intermission for four days from the afternoon of July 31, and heralded the wettest August known in Flanders for many years. Lest it be thought that the badness of the weather has been unduly exaggerated in order to cover the failure of our military methods, it will not, perhaps, be out of place to go into the question in some detail. In the first place, the weather at the beginning of August was not merely exceptionally bad, it was also unexpectedly bad. On July 29, indications were neither strongly for nor strongly against good weather, but on the whole were rather more favourable for the development of anti-cyclonic conditions than for generally unsettled conditions. The beginning of August in Flanders is not generally, as the records show, a wet period. At Dunkirk the rainfall in August 1917 was 189 mm., against an average of 80 mm. over the whole previous period for which records are available. Since 1878 the August rainfall at Dunkirk had only once equalled that of August 1917, namely in 1897, when there was also a fall of 189 mm. The average number of August wet days at Dunkirk is 13 in the month. In 1917 there were 17 wet days; but while the number of wet days was thus considerably above the average for August, the frequency of the rain was

not so outstanding a feature as were its intensity and the accompanying dull conditions which prevented the ground from drying even when no rain was falling. Such abnormal conditions constituted a misfortune which could not be reckoned with or remedied.

Ludendorff divides the great drama of the third Battle of Ypres into five acts. From the point of view of the defence this may be a proper arrangement, but from the British point of view the struggle falls more naturally into three main phases. The first closed when early in September the Second Army took over the critical Menin Road front, and the responsibility for the principal attack on the ridge east of Ypres. The second comes to an end when the heavy rains of early October, completing the work of the continuous downpours of August, called a halt to our attack of October 12 and from that date destroyed the last hope of realising our wider plan. After October 12, as has been indicated above, the object of the fighting, so far as the Flanders theatre was concerned, was nothing more than the attainment of a satisfactory winter line.

As has been seen, our greatest progress on July 31 had been in the direction of Langemarck. The effect of the stubborn resistance of the enemy in the Menin Road sector had been in some sort to deflect the attack, turning its apparent direction away from the ridge east of Ypres to the more low-lying area to the north-east of Ypres, between the ridge and Houthulst Forest, an area sodden with the drainage from the ridge and intersected by many streams. After our opening assault had been brought to an end by the rain, no further attempt to renew the offensive was made till August 16. The operation which completed the capture of Westhoek on August 10 was a purely local attack by troops of two divisions, the 18th and 25th, designed to effect a small but useful improvement in our front there. It was successful at Westhoek, giving us possession of the last point from which the enemy could overlook Ypres and bringing in over 450 prisoners. On the right at Glencorse Wood and Inverness Copse it was less successful, though

our line was advanced and posts established in both localities. Ludendorff refers to this affair as though it had been a major operation and describes it as a German success.

The attack of August 16, on which day, Ludendorff writes, the Germans sustained another great blow, was in fact intended as a major operation. The slight improvement in the weather about this date gave an opportunity that the Army could not afford to miss, though the condition of the ground was indescribably bad and the fortnight already lost since the opening attack was a serious handicap. The success of the Canadians at Hill 70 east of Loos on the previous day was of good augury, and the coming attacks of the Italians on the Carso on August 19 and of the French at Verdun on August 20 made it desirable that there should be no relaxation of activity on the Flanders front. Accordingly the front of the assault launched at 4.45 A.M. on August 16 extended for a distance of over 9 miles from the Ypres-Menin road to the floods north of Steenstraat, and on this front were employed troops of 9 British divisions, in addition to the French troops on our left.¹

The attack in its general features resembled the main assault of July 31. Its direction was once more north-east, the critical Menin Road positions being left on our right flank and attacked only by our extreme right-hand troops north of the road. Whether on this account or for other reasons which certainly contributed to the result, our success was once more marred by a check to our right and right centre—on this occasion, indeed, a very decided check. At 8 A.M. reports indicated that our first objectives had been reached on practically the whole front, except on the extreme right where severe fighting was taking place in exceedingly difficult and broken country. The tanks which it was hoped could be used here found it impossible, owing to the state of the ground, to get to their positions of rendezvous, and the

¹ General Verreaux, who, in describing the Battle of Messines, reduced the front of attack of that completely successful operation by half, has seen fit to double the front of this admittedly only partially successful attack!

infantry of the IInd Corps was left unaided to make the best of a very difficult attack. Fighting was very heavy, and a strong point at the north-west corner of Inverness Copse could not be silenced ; yet troops of the 56th and 8th Divisions, with a brigade of the 18th Division on their right, did get to a line south-east of Glencorse Wood and east of Nonne Boschen and the Hanebeek stream. In this most difficult country this constituted an important advance. Farther north, in the centre and on the left of the battle front, progress continued steadily. The 16th and 36th Divisions of the XIXth Corps got to their final objectives in places, though leaving strong points still holding out behind them. The 48th and 11th Divisions of the XVIIIth Corps reached their final objectives at most points, and the 20th and 29th Divisions of the XIVth Corps at all points with the exception of about 200 yards of trench. Langemarck was taken at 8 A.M. and the Langemarck line beyond it an hour later. The First French Army on the extreme left also gained all their objectives, with the exception of some three or four fortified farms.

Had matters remained in this state, the day might have been reckoned a most successful one, despite the check on the extreme right ; but the exposure of our right flank consequent on this check, combined once more with weather conditions that hindered the effective employment of artillery to break up counter-attacks, led to a repetition on the right and right centre of the events of the afternoon of July 31, but in an even more marked and unfortunate form. The trouble began at 9 A.M. on the XIXth Corps front, when a strong counter-attack, undeterred by losses inflicted by such guns as could be brought to bear, developed against the 16th and 36th Divisions and drove them back, as some thought too easily, to their line of departure. The right of the XVIIIth Corps had to give ground in conformity with this movement, and the IInd Corps, now exposed on its left flank as well as on its right, had to yield up most of its hard-won gains. At the end of the day the IInd Corps was also back in its old line except for a hold on the

western portion of Glencorse Wood and a slight advance north of Westhoek. Our substantial gains were confined to the centre and left half of the attack, where our final line ran from east of St. Julien to east and north of Langemarck and thence to Drie Graachten. The deflection of the direction of our advance to the north-east and north had become more marked. In place of the advance north-east along the ridge originally forecast, we were now driven by force of circumstances to contemplate a direct attack eastwards against the line of the ridge. Sixteen hundred prisoners and 10 guns had been taken by the British, and 400 prisoners and 15 guns by our Allies, the guns being pieces which the enemy had been unable to withdraw owing to the mud, or which were so damaged as not to be worth withdrawing. It may be noted that throughout the whole of the Flanders offensive the German guns were firing at extreme range, and our objectives were rarely deep enough to reach even the more advanced of the enemy's battery positions.¹

The measure of success attained in this attack, though by no means inconsiderable when judged by the standards of 1916 and earlier years, and sufficiently remarkable when regard is had to the extremely adverse circumstances in which the operation was carried out, was none the less a disappointment. Particularly was it so in view of the time already lost and of the delays that it was clear would still have to be endured before the offensive could be renewed under conditions of ground and weather that would give us a better hope of achieving our strategic aim. The slight improvement in the weather experienced about the middle of the month speedily disappeared, and it was not until August had ended that better conditions supervened. By that time the ground was so completely water-logged that

¹ The German guns considerably outranged ours throughout all types of artillery, from the 77 mm. field-gun with a range of 11,000 yards as compared with the 6200 yards of our 18-pr. at this time, to the 15-inch naval gun with a range of at least 35,000 yards. A great handicap in the attack, this disparity of range had an even more marked effect when we were thrown on the defensive.

our armies had perforce to wait for many days before the comparatively dry September had had an appreciable effect upon the going.

The operations of the Fifth Army during the remaining days of August were therefore of an entirely minor character. Nothing more than this was possible, and even so the local gains effected by our troops were won under the greatest difficulties. The 'elastic' system of defence evolved and put into practice by the enemy during 1917 was complicated in Flanders by the presence of the concrete 'pill-boxes' which figured so largely in the reports of the fighting at the time. They constituted a special tactical problem,¹ and during the period of waiting for improved weather formed the objective of a number of minor attacks by which the right centre of the Fifth Army was gradually pushed eastwards towards the ridge. Tanks were employed wherever possible, and on August 19 in particular their skilful use enabled us to capture four of these centres of resistance at a cost of only 15 casualties. More considerable engagements by the IInd, XIXth, and XVIIIth Corps on August 22, in which troops of six divisions took part,² resulted in more important progress on wider fronts, though falling short of the line we had hoped to gain. On the afternoon of August 27 in heavy rain the XIXth, XVIIIth, and XIVth Corps³ attempted a similar operation on a front extending from the Wieltje-Gravenstafel road to Langemarck, with similar results. Such attacks were the utmost that could be attempted in such conditions, and even so it was only with the utmost difficulty that our troops could get forward. The progress they made, however, was valuable, for together

¹ Bombardment was of limited effect against the pill-box; for, while only direct hits by the heavier types of guns could make impression on them, the result of the concentration of artillery fire upon them was to create around them a sort of moat of mud and water—an additional obstacle to infantry attack.

² 14th and 47th Divisions, IInd Corps; 15th and 61st Divisions, XIXth Corps; and 48th and 11th Divisions, XVIIIth Corps.

³ 61st Division, XIXth Corps; 48th and 11th Divisions, XVIIIth Corps; and 38th Division, XIVth Corps.

with smaller gains made by more limited attacks in the first part of September it filled up the long shallow re-entrant in our line between the Menin Road positions and Langemark, and so paved the way for the direct attack on the ridge undertaken successfully on September 20

Meanwhile the alterations in troop dispositions necessitated by the modification of plan which ushered in the second phase of the battle had been effected. The left of the Second Army was gradually extended northwards till its flank lay between Westhoek and the Ypres-Roulers railway, the IInd and XIXth Corps being withdrawn and replaced by the 1st Australian and VIth Corps. By this change the tasks of carrying out the capture of the much contested Menin Road sector and of dealing with the German batteries that could bring flanking fire to bear on it from other areas were placed in the same hands. One of the tactical disadvantages already referred to, namely, the location of the boundary between two armies close to the point of greatest enemy resistance, was accordingly removed. The second disadvantage, that of having assigned to the divisions attacking on the very flank of our main thrust the task of carrying the most formidable hostile position on the whole battle front, was also overcome in this attack by extending the battle front southwards as far as the north bank of the Ypres-Comines canal. The Menin Road sector was brought practically into the centre of the Second Army battle front, and the attack upon it became for the first time a self-contained operation. The Fifth Army was left to continue along the line of advance into which it had been directed by the strength of the resistance encountered on its right flank, namely, north-eastwards and northwards.

That portion of the original scheme which consisted in moving northwards along the ridge as soon as our advance eastwards had reached and secured the crest-line, and without gaining any great depth east of the crest-line, was still adhered to. For example, no real attempt at this stage was to be made to take Gheluvelt, though demonstrations in this direction were intended to make, and did in fact

succeed in making, the enemy think that its capture formed part of our plans. Though a large, and even the major share in the struggle had passed from the Fifth to the Second Army, we were still in this second phase fighting for the same strategic objectives as in the first. It was still hoped that we might gain positions which would enable us to carry out the coastal operation and strike a decisive blow against the German submarine bases in the Channel. Time, however, was now desperately short.

In the three battles that followed, on September 20 and 26 and October 4, the new tactics devised by us to meet the enemy's new system of defence were seen at their best and proved beyond question that an effective answer to the 'elastic' defence had been found. Really rapid movement, such as would have been practicable had it been possible to commence our offensive earlier, or even had August been a month of not more than average rainfall, was still out of the question; but the improvement that took place during September had dried the surface of the ground to some extent, making movement easier, while better visibility enabled our artillery and aeroplanes to do their work effectively. The directions from which counter-attacks might be expected were carefully plotted out beforehand, and arrangements made to deal with them promptly and decisively. Our final objectives in each successive attack were shallow, but they were reached and held. The expected counter-attacks were invariably broken up, and the very shallowness of each separate advance not only reduced greatly the number of our casualties but enabled the next step forward to be taken with the least possible delay. The progress made in the fortnight September 20 to October 4 is some indication of what might have been accomplished had it been possible to continue the same methodical tactics over a longer period. So far as the enemy was concerned, the method meant that he lost comparatively few prisoners and still fewer guns, but his losses in killed and wounded were extraordinarily high. The comparatively weak garrisons holding the forward defence zone were sacrificed from the first. Doubtless

they soon came to know it, with a corresponding weakening of their moral. The enemy was then thrown perforce into the position of the attacker, but instead of attacking men tired and disorganised by a long advance, he was faced by troops in ordered formation and with their front covered by an overwhelming barrage. His own counter-attack divisions had to assemble and form up for the assault under the fire of our heavier guns, and frequently were broken up and dispersed before they were able to develop their attack.

Ludendorff bears eloquent and convincing testimony to the success of our methods and to the losses they caused to the German troops.¹ The strength of the attack, he says, did not consist in tanks, but in the artillery. 'The 26th,' he writes, 'proved a day of heavy fighting, accompanied by every circumstance that could cause us loss. We might be able to stand the loss of ground, but the reduction of our fighting strength was again all the heavier.' So decisive was the superiority of the attack that the German leaders were compelled to cast round for some way by which their defensive tactics might be yet further developed to meet it. Following the opinion of the officers on the spot, it was decided to revert somewhat to earlier tactics. The German front line was slightly reinforced, and counter-attack by special counter-attack divisions was abandoned in favour of local counter-attacks by a division in second line brought close up to the fighting line and spread over a wide front before the British attack began. So, while the front line was to be held rather more densely, the whole battlefield was to be given more depth than ever, with a second line division for every fighting division in front line. As Ludendorff says, 'an unheard-of expenditure of force.' The experiment was tried on October 4 and resulted in the most complete and crushing British victory of the whole offensive. As a result of the thickening of the German front line, the tale of prisoners taken by us rose nearly to 5000, while the massing of German divisions close up to the fighting line led to an appalling slaughter by our guns. The enemy, as

¹ *My War Memories, 1914-1918*, vol. II, p. 488 et seq. (Hutchinson.)

Ludendorff admits, only came through the battle with enormous loss and with the knowledge that he had not yet found the remedy for our system of attack. Ludendorff went back to his favoured system of holding the forward zone lightly, more lightly than ever. It was all he could do. The German wastage in these big actions in Flanders had been extraordinarily high, and in the west the enemy was beginning to be short of troops.

The remedy which Ludendorff could not find was found for him by the weather. October saw a return of exceptional conditions, and by the 20th the number of wet days had already nearly equalled the average for the whole month. The battle of October 4 had given us possession of the ridge from Reutel to beyond Broodseinde, and carried us forward to Poelcappelle. We had reached the position whence we could commence our northward drive with our flank on the ridge. The enemy's moral was shaken and his resources nearing exhaustion. 'At some points,' writes Ludendorff, 'the German infantry no longer displayed that firmness which I, in common with the local commanders, had hoped for. This state of affairs in the west appeared to prevent the execution of our plans elsewhere.'¹ On October 9 we struck again north-east and north between Broodseinde and St. Janshoek, the First French Army once more coming into action on our left after a long period of quiescence. But in the interval the weather had declared against us. October 7 and 8 were days of continuous rain. Dawn on the 9th broke stormily, hindering the work of our aeroplanes and limiting the effectiveness of our artillery. On the extreme right the 2nd Australian Division reached its full objectives on the ridge itself, where the ground was comparatively dry. On the left centre and left, where the enemy's resistance was less obstinate, the 29th and Guards Divisions and the French reached their final objectives south of Houthulst Forest with comparatively slight casualties. In the centre and right centre, where the ground was sodden and marshy with the drainage from the ridge, our troops with diffi-

¹ *My War Memories, 1914-1918*, vol. II, p. 480, and also p. 492.

culty fought their way forward to the approximate line of their first objectives, in the face of very determined opposition. Our captures fell to some 2100 prisoners, and of these 400 were taken by the French.

October 10 was a day of heavy rain. The sands were fast running out, and if another attempt was to be made to develop the success of October 4 it was clear that it would have to be made quickly. It was decided to attack again on the 12th, a brief two days' interval since our last assault. During the night of the 11th-12th our troops assembled for the attack with extreme difficulty in a drenching downpour which recommenced with the opening of the assault.¹ So bad was the weather and so impossible the state of the ground that at midday the operation was broken off, and with it was abandoned all hope of realising the wider plan of the Flanders offensive.

We come to the third and last phase of the great Flanders offensive of 1917. It was now realised that the original strategic aim of the operation, the clearing of the Flanders coast, had become impossible of attainment that year; but there remained a distinct tactical object, in addition to other more general reasons, not connected directly with the Flanders theatre, for continuing our attacks. To deal first with these latter reasons. At this date our long-sustained offensive had attracted to the Flanders front every man and every gun that the German command could spare—and more than could be spared without substantial danger—from the other parts of the German front in the west. Only the steady flow of drafts and divisions now coming in increasing numbers from the Russian front enabled the enemy to refit his battered divisions in the west and risk—for Ludendorff confesses that it was a risk—the despatch of German troops to Italy. A diagram illustrative of the tremendous concentration of German troops on

¹ The attacking divisions were the 4th Australian Division, 1st Anzac Corps, 3rd Australian Division and New Zealand Division, 11th Anzac Corps, 19th and 18th Divisions, XVIIIth Corps, 4th, 17th, and Guards Divisions, XIVth Corps.

the Flanders front is given at the end of the volume. It was very desirable to keep them there, for at this date the French were preparing their attack on the German positions at Malmaison, which on October 22 and following days gave them the Laffaux salient and the Chemin-des-Dames. This admirable stroke had to be assisted by the maintenance of activity on the British front, and in fact our attacks of October 22 at Poelcappelle and south of Houthulst Forest coincided with the French effort.

These operations by the French and ourselves were scarcely over when the storm burst on the Italian front. The only way in which we could give immediate help to our Allies was by continuing our own attacks. We did so effectively, for as the result of our insistent pressure two German divisions destined for Italy from the eastern front were diverted to Flanders.¹ This was direct and immediate assistance which could not have been given by the despatch of troops to Italy, for it takes many weeks to move troops in any quantity over a long line of inadequate railway. There was yet a third reason of a kindred nature for our action, namely, our own coming operation on the Cambrai front. In this also we were successful, for the enemy was expecting a continuation of the attacks in Flanders and on the French front when on November 20 he was surprised by the fresh blow at Cambrai.

To these general reasons was added, as already indicated, one of a local nature. The line gained by us as the result of our attacks up to October 12 was not a favourable one for occupation during the winter. We held the ridge on a comparatively narrow front, and from Nieuwemolen our line ran back north-east to Houthulst Forest across an exceedingly wet tract of ground intersected by many streams which, blocked by innumerable shell holes, had spread out into marshes. Both for tactical reasons and for the sake of the health and less discomfort of our troops, it was of great importance to widen our hold on the ridge and bring back our left across ground more suitable for the construc-

¹ Ludendorff, *My War Memories, 1914-1918*, vol. ii. p. 491.

tion of trenches and other defensive works. These aims would best be achieved if we could push forward along the ridge to just beyond Westroosebeke and bring back our left across the spurs running thence north-westwards to the forest, and in particular across the elevation north of Schaap Balie. This position would give us the best line to hold during the winter; one that could if necessary be defended against serious attack and at the same time would provide the most advantageous jumping-off ground when we were again able to take the offensive.

So far as the local situation in Flanders was concerned, therefore, our object during the remainder of the offensive was confined to attaining this line, or to getting as near to it as possible, and the methods employed were a series of limited attacks with forces comparatively small when contrasted with those employed in the earlier stages of the advance. The artillery battle, however, was continued with great violence, and the enemy appears to have noticed no diminution in the fury of the struggle. Ludendorff treats the affair of October 22, for example, as a major operation. He talks of the horror of the shell-hole area of Verdun being surpassed, and of attackers dragging themselves through the mud slowly, but steadily and in dense masses. The attacks on this day were carried out with notable success by a brigade of the 18th Division, two brigades of the 34th Division, and two brigades of the 35th Division, assisted by a French attack on a front of rather less than 1000 yards. To be sure, the 9th Division on the right of the 18th co-operated—with dummies.

The operation of October 26 was somewhat more considerable, there being six British divisions¹ in the main attack north of the Ypres-Roulers railway, while the 7th Division and a brigade of the 5th Division carried out a diversion in the Menin Road sector. Owing to the bad weather, the French postponed the major part of their share in the operations, but accomplished it successfully in conjunction with Belgian troops in the following two days. Four divisions carried out the attack of October 30 by

¹ 4th and 3rd Canadians, 63rd, 58th, 57th, and 50th Divisions.

which our line was brought to the outskirts of Passchendaele. This was as far as we intended to go on that day, and though there appears to be no doubt that the enemy's troops at Passchendaele ran away, and that the village had to be reoccupied by counter-attack troops, no advantage was taken of this. The incident illustrates a defect, though one difficult to avoid, in our system of attack with fixed and limited objectives. The attack which gave us Passchendaele itself on November 6 was undertaken by two Canadian Divisions only, the 2nd and 1st, and the final assault of the battle, that of November 10, by three divisions, the 1st Division, finally recovered from its 'meningitis,' taking part with the Canadians.

These several minor operations, though successful in impressing the enemy with the belief that we were persisting with undiminished vigour in our original intention, did not in fact achieve the limited object we had in view. Our progress was consistently more rapid on the ridge itself, where the going was comparatively good ; but, though our success here greatly assisted our troops attacking west of the ridge, it did not suffice to lift them out of the wet ground, nor was it sufficiently rapid to enable us to reach Westroosebeke before the time came when the offensive had definitely to be closed down.

Our hold on the ridge had been lengthened and the extent of really bad line at the western foot of the ridge proportionately decreased ; but we were none the less left at Passchendaele in a position which was not really defensible against a determined attack. The possibility of having to evacuate Passchendaele and withdraw to a more defensible line was reckoned with from the moment when our forward movement ceased. On the other hand, we had achieved our wider purpose, and the bulk of the German reserves and the attention of the German Higher Command were still concentrated on the Flanders front when the storm burst at Cambrai.

CHAPTER XV

THE BATTLE OF CAMBRAI: NOVEMBER 20— DECEMBER 6, 1917

EARLY in this book it was pointed out that the crude talk about the backward method of our leadership in France during 1916 and 1917, its lack of genius or skill, its prodigious waste of life—as useless as Napoleon's in Russia—should not be attributed solely to extravagant political rhetoric. Such rhetoric was at times mischievous. But its effect can be exaggerated. Popular and emotional speeches are, above all, transient in effect. Everybody who has attended to political campaigns, platform or parliamentary, knows how soon the effect of a clever speech, a telling effort, passes; the orator and his audience living and feeling intensely in the passing moments only. We could not have the *volte-face*, essential to the adroit party game, without this strict time limitation to the effects of rhetoric. A far more potent cause of error about our strategy than rant or rhetoric at the base lay in the hugeness of the drama on the Western Front between 1916 and 1919, in the unrelenting, drawn-out ferocity of the chief battles there. These, having absolutely no parallel in the past, confused men's minds and led to misjudgment of our strategy in France. Besides, as long as hostilities lasted, it was, as we have seen, out of the question to give hard facts about the relative efforts of the two Allied Armies at various periods during the war. To do that, it was well to wait not only till peace had been signed in 1919 but till there was at least some prospect of the terms of that peace being applied with good will and agreement between the Allied nations.

And the vastness of the drama in the west in those years

caused not only a widespread misunderstanding of the way our leadership in France conducted the campaign: it led, soon after the close of fighting, to the saying, 'We have heard and talked enough of the war, and had now better try to forget all about it.' That common form appears stupid, still it was natural. Those who uttered or felt it wished to get back, intellectually and emotionally, to more manageable subjects and discussions. The Colossus had begun to repel them. They had had enough for a time of what they then came to regard as the megalomania of the past three or four years.

The huge character of this conflict in the vital theatre of the war is well illustrated by contrasting it with the Napoleonic era, which till lately was discussed and studied as keenly as ever, and by a far larger public than had ever attended to it before. The Napoleonic struggle, though it lasted much longer than the war of 1914-1918, was almost a puny affair compared with a year's conflict on the Western Front. Viewed in the light of, say, even the Allied baulked offensive of 1917, or of one of the lesser German thrusts at British or French in the first half of 1918, the principal battles of the Napoleonic period, or indeed of any 17th, 18th, or 19th century war, appear as minor operations: minor in the number of the fighting men, in the extent of the battle front, in the mass of material employed, in the long elaborate preparations for the attack and defence; and minor in the knowledge and skill of the combatants on both sides.

Glancing at the records of a few of the most famous battles in which British, French, Germans, Russians, Austrians and Italians were engaged before and during the Napoleonic era, we notice, for instance, that at Blenheim in 1704 the French and Bavarian leaders had a force of 60,000 ¹troops with 81 guns, the Allies 56,000 with 52 guns. Forty years later the armies of both sides at Dettingen scarcely exceeded 100,000. At Pultowa Charles XII. had

¹ These figures and those which follow are approximate only, but they serve the purpose.

24,000 men. Napoleon's Egyptian expedition consisted of 36,000 men. At Albuera we had about 32,000 men (less than a fourth of whom were British) against Soult's 23,000; whilst Masséna's army at Busaco was 65,000. Yet these were world-famed battles, which appeared to our ancestors, indeed to ourselves till recent years, as cast in a mighty mould! Leaving out of account our Prussian allies of that period, only a few thousands of whom were flung into the battle before Napoleon's retreat, the total numbers under British and French at Waterloo appear to have been under 140,000. Aspern and Wagram in 1809 were regarded as titanic efforts, yet even there, we are told, the total numbers on both sides were not 400,000. Napoleon's 'Grand Army' in the Peninsula at the time of Corunna and the pursuit of Moore is put at about 200,000, but no such force seems ever to have been thrown into a single battle by one of the combatants during Napoleon's era or before it.

Had St. Eloi and The Bluff been fought during the wars of Marlborough, Frederick, or Napoleon and Wellington, they would have ranked as considerable battles. They come within the period discussed in this book, but could at most be dealt with here as local activity on the Western Front in the winter of 1915-1916. It may be objected that a battle can be on an insignificant scale as regards number of men and amount of material, yet be decisive in its result, and rich in military lessons or genius even; therefore, that some action on the scale of a Pultowa may be as well worth study as, or more so than, a Passchendaele. Well, that is conceivable, but, to say the least, improbable. The offensives on the Western Front did not give immediate military 'decisions' in the sense in which the term is technically used. Yet would Creasy writing to-day have cared to leave them out of a work on the decisive battles of the world? Doing so, he would have had to face some ridicule.

The truth is, these offensives are bound, for centuries to come, to eclipse—completely—in the whole world's interest and attention all past wars. If we do go back to the study

of past wars, we shall possibly prefer, whilst we are about it, to go back to Hannibal.

We may turn away for a time, dazed or confounded, from the Colossus : but not to concentrate, instead, on Lilliput.

As to the terms 'decision,' 'decisive,' they appeal to some of us who witnessed portions of one or two of the chief offensives of 1916-1917 and who study their ultimate results as suitable and truly expressive—if not strictly the technical—terms to apply, say, to the Somme or the Flanders offensive.

In regard to its effects on nationality, on the whole of our society and civilisation, we already know enough to be sure that the European War of 1914-1918 was incomparably greater than the period of Napoleon.¹

* * * * *

The Battle of Cambrai, November 20 to December 6, 1917, was one of the few British battles belonging to the period covered by this book which was cast—more or less—on a Napoleonic, a moderate, scale in regard to the number of troops employed. We put into it in all, say, a quarter of a million men. Altogether, possibly half a million men took part in the battle. Through its abrupt start and close, it conveys the idea, too, of something distinct in itself, clean-cut ; though that idea can easily be carried too far, for actually the stroke in its inception was closely associated with the Flanders campaign. Nor must it be considered apart from the crisis on the Italian front. It was started in some part to help Italy after Caporetto, though planned months before : it was continued in some part for the same

¹ No doubt the Blenheim and Austerlitzes and Torgaus, though so small in force and numbers of fighters engaged compared with the conflict on the Western Front, are interesting to study as one-man battles. But that aspect of war can be exaggerated. The genius attributed to a successful stroke of arms can be made too much of. Tolstoy—himself a rare genius in imagination—passed to the opposite extreme in making too light of Napoleon's will to victory, but his paradox is a useful corrective. The power of some super-man to win great battles, in modern war at any rate, is discredited by 1914-1918 ; and the attempt made after the Armistice in 1918 to reintroduce that idea was foolish. When we examine coolly the events of 1916-1918, we find there is nothing in it.

'cause after the initial success had ended. 'The English Army Commander,' says Ludendorff, 'did not exploit his great initial success. If he had done so what would have been the judgment on the Italian campaign?' We will presently consider this point about the failure to exploit the break-through on November 20. Meanwhile, the quotation is interesting as showing that Ludendorff attached far greater importance to the Western Front than to any other. He had enjoyed an extraordinary success in the southern theatre; a success which sent Allied statesmen racing to Rapallo, and induced them to establish yet another Command, a Supreme Command. Yet Ludendorff gives us to understand that, had the limited design¹ of the British at the Battle of Cambrai been fully carried out and exploited, his victory over the Italians would have stood for very little.² Here, if ever, was Westernism, and in a great soldier and organiser who had spent the best part of two years in the war on an eastern front. Against a severe yet after all a limited repulse of his forces on the Western Front he would not have been prepared to accept as recompense an immense victory for his chief Ally, Austria, against the lately triumphant Italian Army. At the same time, whilst attaching supreme significance to the main essential front—that in France and Belgium—Ludendorff was far from disposed to make light of Russia in the summer of 1917. He says that in June and July he could not freely feed the Western Front at the expense of the eastern, for 'heavy work had to be done' there. So he, too, like Haig and Nivelle, was still thinking at this period of Russia.

Again, writing of the final offensive by the Russians starting on July 11, 1917, when Brussilov and Kornilov had considerable successes, Ludendorff remarks that, if it had

¹ He may not, when he wrote the passage after the war, have known the exact nature of the plan, but he must have known it was limited and not meant to defeat the German Armies, and roll them out of France and Belgium. The small front of the attack and the comparatively few divisions we put in made this clear enough.

² As a fact he had only contributed two divisions from the Western Front, and these he promptly replaced by two others from Russia.

occurred in April and May (when the British and French were still engaged in the spring offensive), 'I do not see, as I look back, how G.H.Q. could have mastered the situation.' Exactly! It was the joint blow, the simultaneous offensive by the Allies, which the Germans dreaded. This blow the Allies did deal in 1916, and we know from Ludendorff and other German generals the straits it reduced the German Army to. In 1917 this scientific plan for the Allies to strike, virtually, together was not altogether promised by Joffre. Nor did Nivelle, on taking over the French command, insist on it. For both these leaders were anxious lest the enemy should repeat on the French Army's front an operation like that of Verdun, and so they wished to strike long before Russia and Italy could be ready.

Finally, when the British and Russians in 1917 were striking more or less together, the French were standing out.¹ Thus the scientific and deadly simultaneous Allied offensive was wanting in 1917. Haig consistently pressed for it in 1917, as he had in 1916, but he got little support from Allied leadership. Joffre had been removed: Nivelle would not support him: Pétain could not support him.

The joint simultaneous offensive believed in by our G.H.Q. would have served infinitely better—only the sham imaginative school of war has questioned it—than the idea of darting divisions to and fro from front to front, now to 'save' Roumania, now to secure Mesopotamia, and now to 'knock-out' Austria, regardless of the fact that, anyhow, we could not compete successfully in this method with a power like Germany which possessed the interior lines and therefore the facilities.

* * * * *

Planned, in its main features, months before it started, Cambrai was, nevertheless, the best kept secret of the war so far. An astonishingly small number of people knew of it. It was a secret not only at divisional, corps, and army head-

¹ The Russian offensive, Brusilov in command, started on July 1, after our offensive at Messines and when we were preparing the greater Flanders attack.

quarters ; even at G.H.Q. it remained till well on in the second or third week of November unknown to many who ordinarily must learn about an offensive or a considerable action weeks or months before the event. Secrecy, in this case absolutely essential to success, would, naturally, be more effectively secured by attacking on a small front, and of course without previous artillery preparation, and for this battle a front of six miles was chosen. But had our resources in men and tanks been larger we should all the same have attacked probably on a wider front. On August 8, 1918, we attacked on a front of eleven miles, and yet the secret was admirably kept.

The attention of the armies and the statesmen and nations behind them, when the battle of Cambrai started, was concentrated on the Italian situation, and still on Flanders ; as German situation maps show, the enemy's concentration in Flanders had not yet weakened. Owing to its secrecy and suddenness, Cambrai was at the time regarded as a mysterious, even an incomprehensible, stroke. What was darkly intended by it ? people at home asked one another. Legends grew up over Cambrai, one of these being that it was meant as a rebuke, a sharp lesson, to a malcontent civilian power at home not to underrate the skill of the British Army in France. That was entertaining, only there was nothing in it. In despatches, as we have seen, it is not often possible during hostilities to give the full facts of war. If it was, the work of secret services would be sensibly lightened ! But, once the secret of the attack was out, it was not necessary to withhold much as to the aims of this battle. These were stated in the admirable Despatch of February 20, and published as a supplement (March 4) to the *London Gazette* of March 1, 1918. The pressure on the enemy in Flanders had been continued through the second half of October and until November 6, partly to pin his forces there and give us a better chance of success in the Cambrai operations, the preparations for which could not be completed till the end of the third week in November.¹

¹ Additionally, in some degree to assist the French who were preparing

As to the plan of attack at Cambrai, Map Five in the Despatches well illustrates the operations : whilst Map Two ('The German Retreat to the Hindenburg Line, Winter 1916-17') shows the nature of the subsequent and larger design should the cavalry and infantry be able to exploit thoroughly a complete success within, at utmost, the first forty-eight hours. The enemy front selected for the stroke lay between the Canal de l'Escaut and the Canal du Nord from a point near Gonnellieu to just west of Havrincourt village. It had been greatly strengthened by the Germans since the Hindenburg Retreat in the spring. It now consisted of two most powerful systems of defence, the Hindenburg Line and the Hindenburg Reserve Line, with on the east side a third line behind those—the Marquion, Masnières, and Bearevoir line—and preliminary outpost defences in front, such as those about La Vacquerie.¹

The attack could only succeed—with the limited number of divisions at the Commander-in-Chief's disposal at the time—provided the Germans were taken completely by surprise and their front held by a comparatively weak force. Therefore, the rupture of the enemy's line must be very swiftly accomplished and it must be virtually complete along the whole front attacked. A success within twenty-four hours was aimed at, and hoped for : if it was not achieved within forty-eight hours, the enemy would have time to recover from the opening shock, however severe, bring fresh forces into the sector and thus annul our chances of the exploitation which was to follow.

This exploitation—the nature of which will be presently described—meant that, to start with, the cavalry, three

for their operation at Malmaison on the Aisne front, which took place on October 20.

¹ This line followed the east bank of the Canal de l'Escaut from about Cambrai to the village of Grèvecœur; thence it turned away south-east, becoming the Bearevoir-Fonsomme line which we broke through in October 1918 after the great battle of the Hindenburg Line. If these final defences could be stormed on the opening day, nothing of importance would lie between our troops and Cambrai or the heights to the west of that town which we chiefly aimed at.

divisions, passing through the gap on the east side made by the attacking troops, should sweep to the right and left of and around the town of Cambrai, disorganising the whole of the German local command and communications; and should serve as a screen for the advancing infantry who were to seize the high ground immediately east and west of Brouillon, thus establishing a good defensive flank between the wood and Cambrai. The cavalry would keep the German reinforcements occupied, whilst our right infantry divisions were extending and securing our right flank and the centre—particularly the Vth Corps—was exploiting northwards. The high ground secured, the enemy's forces and communications as far as the Sensée would be placed at once in an impossible position. They would have to retire from the whole region, and their losses would be severe; for from this high ground about Brouillon our guns would command all the ground as far as the Sensée Canal, including the main road from the Arras region to Cambrai. The Sensée, moreover, as Map Two of the Despatches shows, was flooded and the ground would be hazardous for a retreating enemy to pass over. If one viewed the battle area as the writer often did in November and December 1917 from about Havrincourt and the Hermies district and the Canal du Nord, this—the main purpose of the battle—was rather apt to elude one. The thoughts and eye would somehow wander to Cambrai itself. Its capture, however, was a minor consideration. The master aim was to win the Brouillon ridge and thus paralyse the enemy in the whole of the ground sloping down thence to the Sensée, north and west.

Coming a fortnight or so after the end of the Flanders offensive, which had strained the enemy's resources to near the breaking-point, the blow must have proved a very severe one, and, Ludendorff admits, have quite discounted his triumph on the Italian front. If it was not worth while trying this stroke, it may occur to one to ask, Was any offensive worth trying in 1917? Was Messines worth while in June? Why should the French have conducted even a lesser operation without strategic aims at Malmaison in

October? The answer, 'Yes, both were worth while, because those attacks succeeded,' is not conclusive; for the retort to that might be, 'But we lost Messines again in April 1918, whilst the French were thrown out of Malmaison and the whole of the Chemin-des-Dames in May 1918.'

Besides, to declare the Cambrai attack was rash or useless is to forget that, thanks largely to the lessons of November 20, 1917, Haig's operation of August 8, 1918, with its wonderful developments was made a glorious success.

It is a question whether any stroke of Allied arms on the Western Front was more fruitful, ultimately, of grand result than this Battle of Cambrai, despite its limited design.

Before describing briefly the opening passages of the battle it is well to emphasise its project of exploitation, for this has not so far been understood by the public. The term 'exploitation' was sometimes between 1914 and 1919 considerably vague. That cannot be said of the Battle of Cambrai, where the plan was as follows :—

After tanks and infantry had broken the German defences on a front of 10,000 yards between the Canal de l'Escaut and the Canal du Nord, and reached, on the first day, the line Crèvecœur-Masnières-Maroing-Graincourt-Mœuvres, cavalry was to pass through northwards, one division (the 1st Cavalry Division) on the left side of the Canal de l'Escaut and two divisions (the 2nd and 5th Cavalry Divisions) on the right side. The 2nd and 5th Cavalry Divisions were to isolate and swing past the town of Cambrai, thence turn westwards and seize the passages across the Sensée river at (1) Paillencourt and (2) Palluel; which would have the effect of cutting off the German troops in the Quéant salient. At the same time Bourlon Wood, a tactical position of first-rate importance, was to be turned from the north-east, the 1st Cavalry Division going through on the west side of the Canal de l'Escaut.

Meanwhile, the IIIrd Corps, whose infantry, with the tanks, was to break the enemy defences on the east side on the morning of November 20, would follow the cavalry across the Canal de l'Escaut and form a defensive flank of some ten

miles in length from Crèvecœur to Iwuy north-east of Cambrai.

On the second day, for full exploitation, a fresh corps of infantry would move north, leaving the cavalry on its right. This, the Vth Corps (consisting of Guards, 40th and 59th Divisions) was to pass through between the two canals and strike northwards to the Sensée river, its right flank being defended by cavalry. Finally, this corps was to push forward advanced guards northwards to capture the high ground between Sensée and Scarpe.

Cambrai, as every one knows, was the first highly successful stroke on a large scale with tanks. We had learnt a good deal about the use of tanks since Mark I. came out in September 1916 at the Battle of the Somme. We learnt it, inevitably, through hard experience in the field. In 1916 the liaison between tanks and infantry was crude. It was, as we have noticed, crude and imperfect too when, about seven months later, the French for the first time used tanks in the Battle of the Aisne, April 16, 1917. To say that this ought not to have been so in 1916 and that the leaders ought to have provided for an effective, scientific liaison before the tanks were used at all is stupid. British leadership might as reasonably be blamed for not waiting till Mark V. was ready for use instead of experimenting with Mark I. To discover, for certain, the most scientific method of warfare, an army must be constantly fighting. It never has been, and never will be, discovered in the study, even by a committee. To have waited till November 20, 1917—or August 8, 1918—before starting the tanks would have been about as sapient as to wait for fuse 106 before attempting to deal with the enemy's wired defences. Even by November 1917 the need of a perfect liaison between tanks and infantry had not been completely grasped, as shown by the fact that tanks failed to achieve full success in one or two instances—notably at Flesquières on November 20 when the infantry was not close enough to work in with them against the enemy. Again, a large experience of the right co-operation of tanks and other arms might well have gained us Bourlon

Wood on November 20; for tanks, accompanied by a reasonable force of infantry or dismounted cavalry, or cyclists, could have succeeded there on the opening day. Yet, on the whole, the tanks' success on November 20, 1917, was impressive. It led on to the series of successes with tanks which began on August 8, 1918, and continued almost unbroken till the Armistice.¹

The attack started at 6.20 A.M. on November 20, with 324 tanks (Mark IV.) and six infantry divisions, the 12th, 20th, 6th, 51st, 62nd, and 36th, from east to west in the order named; one brigade of the 36th alone attacking on the west side of the Canal du Nord without tanks. The 29th Division came up later in the day to attack on the east side.² There was no preliminary barrage, and the enemy was taken completely by surprise. The night before the battle he had shelled one part of our line heavily, but only for a short period; and there is no doubt that our long, elaborate preparations had been unobserved by Von Marwitz's army which faced us. A few successful raids during the first half of November against the British lines between the two canals might have put the enemy on his guard, but only one raid seems to have been attempted shortly before November 20 and it did not give him any valuable information.

The success of the attack, except at two places, on the six miles of front concerned was extraordinary. Both the chief defence lines were carried by tanks and infantry, the 62nd Division had actually advanced by the end of the first day to the Bapaume-Cambrai road, a distance of some four and a half miles; our casualties were light, and we had captured 5000 prisoners. But at Masnières, a misadventure through a tank breaking down the highroad bridge across the Canal de l'Escaut, and at Flesquières the gallantry of a

¹ On October 17, 1918, Ludendorff, addressing the German Chancellor and other civilian leaders when peace offers were being discussed, attributed a good deal of the German Army's falling off to tank terror. The British soldiers and the tanks he very distinctly emphasised in this respect. This is derived from German official documents.

² The 56th Division on the left of the 36th Division joined in after the first day.



Original British Front Line.
 Line reached by Cavalry Division.
 Line reached by Cavalry Division.
 Line reached by Cavalry Division.
 Line reached by Cavalry Division.

Scale in Miles. 10

Roads, — Woods, ***
 Railways, + + +

THE CAMPAIGN OF CAMBRAI, 1917: PLAN OF THE BRITISH ATTACK

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German officer who served one of the field-guns of his battery alone till he was shot, made all the difference. Our advance was delayed by these two incidents. We did not gain Flosquières ridge till the morning of November 21, and the tank's mishap at Masnières helped to save the enemy's third line of defence on the east side of the battlefield. Even so, this delay for a few hours might not have saved the situation for Von Marwitz except for the fact that, unknown to us, he had just detrained the 107th Division, fresh from Russia, at Cambrai, and was able with it to fortify his line between Rumilly and Crèvecœur in the nick of time. Ludendorff says it was the intervention of the 107th, which was put in at Cambrai owing to the way that sector had been bled by Flanders' requirements, that chiefly checked our advance on November 20; and he is right. Some resolute opposition was put into the German fighting forces immediately south of the town of Cambrai: and the hope of a great rôle for the cavalry was virtually over. The disappointing news circulated among those on the spot on the morning of November 21 that, though the first part of the operation—the break-through—had been wonderfully successful, the second—exploitation by cavalry east and west of Cambrai—had, somehow, failed.

Ludendorff says the Third British Army did not exploit its great success. Unfortunately, it is true. Could the success have been exploited on November 20, profitably and without useless losses in men and horses, under the conditions of delay referred to? The Cambrai plan was daring. It was brilliant. It was original. In brilliancy it can compare with Nivelle's lesser operations at Verdun in October-December 1916, or with the admirable French counter-stroke by Foch on July 18, 1918, on the Marne, or with our own battle of August 8, 1918, in front of Amiens. It only suffers in such a comparison when we consider the question of immediate, satisfying result: and then certainly it does suffer.

How came it that so ingenious a plan, carried out by tanks and infantry on the opening day with high skill and success, ended in disappointment? It is hard to resist the evidence

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that the Third Army failed to provide for the situation which their opening stroke produced on November 20. The organisation, the thinking department, was equal to the opening stroke which smashed with ease about the most formidable German defensive lines in France. In this it was a vast improvement on, for instance, the Aisne plan of rupture in April. But here the thinking side seems to have exhausted its ingenuity. The check at Flosquières, the broken-down bridge at Masnières—with other difficulties in that part of the field, such as getting tanks and men quickly to work on congested roads—the unexpected arrival of the 107th German Division, these were no doubt impediments to swift, complete success. But should they have proved insuperable? The ground on most of the battlefield of Cambrai was very favourable to a quick advance by cavalry and by infantry once a break-through had been achieved. This had been well recognised beforehand. It had been counted on. Roads, on the whole, were not nearly so much needed for quick advance and exploitation here as in other battlefields in 1916 and 1917. Besides, the ground was scarcely shelled at all either in the back areas or close behind the troops as they rapidly advanced on the morning of November 20. The surprise inflicted on the enemy accounted in large degree for this.

Advantage of these facts was not taken to rush up the available reserves, which surely could have been done without very heavy cost. As it was, opportunities to form one-way circular routes—for example, between Trescault and Ribécourt—were neglected; and the roads actually opened up across no-man's-land were congested not merely by mine-craters, trenches, and other unavoidable obstacles, but also by the heavy streams of traffic that were moving in opposite directions along the same road, and seeking to pass each other at these obstacles.

The ground being firm and the going easy almost everywhere on the battlefield, quick progress of material and of men, mounted and unmounted, ought to have been quite practicable. The excellent character of the ground, as

already stated, had been appreciated long before the battle. It was one of the arguments for cavalry exploitation. Yet, when the opportunity came to make use of this rare advantage, it was not seized. Congestion behind a great offensive, congestion long before the battle starts, is often unavoidable. Here, however, no congestion hindered us till after the battle had started, and started with a great success. Then it began at once to impede us at vital points, surely through want of sufficient forethought.

The cavalry question must be considered. It is most important, for after the break-through everything depended on the speed with which this arm could be utilised to the full.

Our force of cavalry was certainly small in 1917—to become smaller in 1918—for reasons to be examined later.¹ Still, the five divisions of cavalry were available for Cambrai; and, for this purpose and that, four of them actually were employed during the battle and the German counter-offensive at the end of the month. Thus even those who are least inclined to be critical of the original plan cannot but ask themselves, 'Why, after the capture of by far the greater portion of the German lines on the morning of the 20th, was not the cavalry rapidly pushed through west, if not east, of the Canal de l'Escaut?'

As to the western side, the space between Flesquières and the canal was narrow, there were some snipers left in and around Ribécourt after the morning of the 20th, and there were machine guns north and east of the village. Substantial casualties might have been incurred had the mounted troops passed through here before the enemy's resistance at Flesquières was broken. But a comparatively high price was worth paying on November 20, after the success of the tanks and infantry: for it has always to be borne in mind that Exploitation was the chief idea of the battle.

¹ At the end of February 1871, the German Army still had a cavalry force of 55,562 on French soil, besides a reserve in garrison of between 5000 and 6000; or fully twice the British total in France in November 1917.

Nor were casualties prevented as it was. Between November 20 and December 4 the total casualties to cavalry, British and Indian, in this battle amounted to 951, all ranks.¹ Yet we had little to show for this price. Many gallant acts on both sides of the canal, and later in the German attack, were performed by cavalry which was kept on to advance and fight.

Recognising and deploring the failure to pass the cavalry through at this point, as well as on the left side of the canal, some students of the battle insist that it was an error in the original plan to tie down the cavalry at all to this side of the field; that they should have been kept in readiness—and sufficiently near—for use wherever the most promising break-through occurred, and be forced forward there; that they could have been passed through west of Flesquières to good effect, seeing that the 62nd Division quickly broke the German resistance in that part of the field. This is a reasonable contention, but, accepted, it by no means proves that the bulk of the cavalry could not on November 20 have been successfully passed through on both sides of the canal. Surely the difficulties that occurred on the 20th, through destruction or dearth of bridges by which the cavalry must cross the canal in order to work round east of Cambrai as well as west, might have been provided against before the battle? Casualties considerably above those to which the cavalry had become accustomed in their periods of duty in the trenches during the summer of 1917 might have been experienced on the eastern side, and higher probably on the eastern side of the canal than on the west, owing to the Beaufort-Masnières line. But, it must be insisted, the price was worth facing. As a fact, one squadron of the 5th Cavalry Division (B Squadron, Fort Garry Horse, Canadian Cavalry Brigade), after waiting some hours for the construction of a bridge, did cross the canal at about 3.30 P.M. on the 20th. It crossed between Masnières and Crèvecœur, advanced east of Rumilly, and broke

¹ *i.e.* 204 killed, 680 wounded, 67 missing. These figures comprised 85 officers and 866 other ranks.

through the Beaufort-Masnières line. They even captured a German 77 mm. battery near Rumilly. They were, however, only an ineffectual handful—and an order had been sent to them not to cross the canal, though by an accident it was not delivered in time to prevent their starting.¹ The adventure of this gallant squadron shows what could have been accomplished on the 20th, or even the 21st, of November had the arrangements for the cavalry been thought out by the brains of the Third Army with the skill and resolution that were devoted to the first stage of the battle, that of tanks and infantry. The capture of Cambrai itself was, as we have seen, subsidiary; and virtually it would have been isolated had we succeeded in gaining the high ground to the west of it. Still the stroke would have proved more crushing and complete had the plan for passing the cavalry round east as well as west of the town been carried through on the first, even the second, day of the battle.

The Battle of Cambrai, then, as planned for months past and sanctioned by G.H.Q., meant, above all, Exploitation. In this matter it is not without interest to compare our limited design with the huge one of the Battle of the Aisne. In both cases, Exploitation was the dominating idea, and at the Aisne, as here, cavalry was speedily to be passed through after the rupture of the chief enemy positions; though in the French plan exploitation was to be continued by an immense force of infantry, the Tenth and other armies

¹ Ultimately, as no reinforcements came in sight and enemy machine gunners from the blockhouses were concentrating on the squadron a heavy fire, the troops were dismounted at a sunken road which was held till dark. They then returned on foot to the British lines, fighting their way back through parties of the enemy. At one point the men were allowed to sleep for two hours in a chalk-pit whilst the officers reconnoitred and discussed a plan for the return. There was a risk of the squadron being discovered owing to the loud snoring of some of the men! The bridge by which the squadron had crossed seems to have taken about an hour and a quarter to construct. It was of an amateur character, but served its purpose. Among the builders were ten Germans (somewhat uneasy, it was said, through the fire of the machine gunners and snipers), and seven French civilians who supplied ropes and axes

and the whole Allied line to follow. The French plan was unlimited, ours at Cambrai was, perforce, limited. The British plan, as far as its initial stage went, was far better thought out and scientifically provided for than that of the Aisne. It was kept secret—it was not in principle or detail imparted to both sides in two nations. The ground was incomparably more promising, despite the formidable German defences, than the ground selected by Nivolle and his Staff. The opportunity was also a much better one. The tactical arrangements for the opening attack reflect true credit on the organisers of the Third Army; whereas some of those for the Aisne invited, and obtained, ridicule—it being reasonably predicted, for example, that the French troops, thanks to the meticulously exact time-table, would telescope each other, which is what they did within the first few hours of that battle.

Hence the preliminary operation, the sudden breakthrough, failed on the Aisne and was a success at Cambrai. But here, unfortunately, the shining contrast between the two battles tends to grow dimmer: the second part, the grand essential part, of the Cambrai plan failed as did the first part of the Aisne plan. Ludendorff's criticism therefore cannot be lightly disposed of.

Apart from the question, touched on above, whether the cavalry should or should not have been mainly allotted to an advance across the Canal de l'Escaut and round the east side of Cambrai, it is most doubtful whether, in any case, this force was near enough to the front shortly before the battle started. On November 19 the 3rd and 4th Cavalry Divisions were concentrated some twenty miles from the front. By 1 p.m. on the 20th the 62nd Division in the centre of the battle had broken through the German defences on a front of nearly 3000 yards; but when cavalry was asked for in order to go through this gap it was not available. The 3rd and 4th Cavalry Divisions were not within reach. The 1st, 2nd, and 5th, it is true, had been in their forward concentration areas by zero. Those divisions, however, were allotted to the advance on the right flank: moreover,

they had marched for five hours during the night of the 19th-20th, covering from 26 to 35 miles.

Nor were any of the three divisions of the Vth Infantry Corps available for exploiting the gap made by the 62nd Division in the centre of the battlefield, as they too were out of reach. Reasonable caution, of course, had to be exercised in regard to bringing up the reserves before the battle. Pressing forward too many troops, mounted and unmounted, close up to the front lines on November 19 might have conveyed a warning to the enemy. There was possibly some risk in that. On the other hand, everything depended on our being able to exploit swiftly a rupture in the German defences, yet when this was effected in the centre, no reserve force was at hand to seize the grand opportunity. The Vth Corps lay at and around Bapaume on November 19-20. It was too far away. One fresh division of infantry, had it been close up by Havrincourt Wood early in the afternoon of November 20, could have been passed through west of Flesquières, and have captured the Bourlon ridge. Its absence saved the Germans.

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If after capturing Flesquières early on the 21st we had drawn back the 62nd and other divisions which had advanced beyond that ridge towards Bourlon, if we had consolidated our gains, and closed the battle, the operation would have been hailed by those not acquainted with its full aims as a brilliant victory. And admittedly the capture of a substantial total of guns and prisoners, the breaking of the Hindenburg Line at a very strong point, and the shock inflicted on the enemy, would in themselves have been serviceable contributions. The German counter-offensive of November 30 could not in that case have taken place, and cast a gloom over people at home.

A believer in *grignotage* would have stopped on the 22nd after the German opposition had stiffened, and the capture of the Beaufort-Masnières line on the east side of the canal was deemed no longer feasible. But what would have befallen the Allied cause if such a tentative policy of small

aims had prevailed through 1917 in both armies on the Western Front after the miserable failure of the Aisne scheme? A policy of hoarding our resources, of waiting to learn how soon America might be able to come in—or of how long Germany might be able to hold out; a policy of mounting, at most, so-called 'perfect' operations without the ghost of a strategic aim; a policy of *grignotage*? Such a policy might have brought us some kind of arranged peace with the Central Powers, but the vast bulk of the British people did not wish for that. And the War Cabinet asked for a 'knock-out blow.'

The Commander-in-Chief decided to go on with the operations after the 22nd. His reasons were fully given in the despatch and need not be repeated here. They were in accord with our whole policy on the Western Front in 1917, as admirably stated by the British Prime Minister in the spring at Paris, and acted upon by the Commander-in-Chief throughout the year. Nobody now has a word to say against his action in September and October 1918 when he took heavy risks in striking at the Drocourt-Quéant and the Hindenburg Lines—for that turned out at once successful and broke the German Army in France and Belgium.

And yet it would have been more excusable to hold back from a bold aggressive policy in September and October 1918 than to hold back in 1917. In 1918 we *might* have held back, exercised marked caution, without possibly greatly endangering the Allied cause, for the American Army was then being forged into a powerful weapon, whilst France and Italy had come through their respective military crises. As a fact, 1919, not 1918, was to be the year of victory, the year looked forward to by statesmen and organisers in this country, before those decisive British strokes in September and October 1918. Munitions, etc., were to be perfected accordingly. Whereas in 1917 we lost one of our Allies altogether; two others, successively, were for a period *hors de combat* through their military misfortunes; and Germany in the circumstances

was more threatening than she had been since the beginning of the war. Had our military leader hung back from risks in 1917, and preferred the pottering game of *grignolage*, he would have played into the enemy's hands.¹

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With the failure of the scheme of Exploitation, the extraordinary interest of this Battle of Cambrai fades. Our capture of Bourlon Wood by the 40th Division was notable, and there was hard fighting there and thereabouts, but we never actually succeeded in taking the whole of the high ground west and east of the wood needed to give us the commanding position northwards to the Sensée—the position which should have been secured on November 20.

On November 30 came the German counter-offensive, about which something should be said. The stroke was by no means a surprise, except in its massive character—for it amounted to a counter-offensive. The IIIrd Corps, for instance, had been convinced for some days that it was going to be attacked, and was uneasy. But, as the despatch stated, the attack on the IIIrd Corps front, the southern side, between Masnières and Gonnellieu, did effect severe local surprises through its suddenness—and its skill. Our front was held on this sector by the 29th, 20th and 12th Divisions, which had attacked on the first day of the battle, and by a portion only of the 55th Division. The Germans entirely failed to break the defence of the 29th² about Masnières and Marcoing, but farther south they swiftly broke through the line where the 12th and 55th joined and

¹ By the way, the policy of small and 'perfect' operations without strategic aim strikes some of us as about the most cold-blooded and diabolic in war; as a thing indeed only excusable when the object is to keep up the fighting spirit.

² This division's record in 1917 is a fine one. Altogether it took part in no less than eight separate attacks. The same record can be claimed by the 2nd Canadian Division in 1917. The story of the great fight the 29th Division put up on November 30 has yet to be written. It held out against immense difficulties, thanks to skill and valour unsurpassed perhaps by any division during 1917. Two of its officers, Captain Gee, V.C., and Captain Loseby, M.C., are well-known figures in the House of Commons to-day.

worked north and south behind the posts of both divisions. The 20th Division also fared ill, being driven back from the northern part of Bonavis ridge, though its strong points, fiercely attacked by concentrated artillery fire, held out resolutely till the enemy was actually at the back of them. In an hour and a half the defences of Gonnellieu, Villers Guislain and Bonavis had been broken and Gouzeaucourt captured. The position of the Third Army in the whole Cambrai salient was in danger, when at midday the Guards, coming from the north of Havrincourt Wood where they were resting, attacked and drove the Germans out of Gouzeaucourt and made some progress on the ridge just east of that village. The chief danger was thus averted, but the stroke had proved costly for us. Ludendorff says it had not achieved its full purpose : still it could be claimed as a victory and that was exceedingly important for German purposes. For a victory, Ludendorff admits, he had been hoping in vain for months past.¹ It cost us over 150 guns, and probably between 6000 and 7000 prisoners.

This attack on the 29th, 20th, 12th and the northern portion of the 56th Divisions was, as far as we know, delivered by some five and a half German divisions. As to the disposition of our own forces, the 56th troops were, for their numbers, holding a wide front. They held the shoulder of the salient, and, being in our pre-battle line, had the benefit of our defensive works, but they were spread out on at least a two-division front for a defensive battle ; and it is here suggested they might with advantage have been reinforced before the 30th.

Bonavis ridge, held south to north by the 12th and 20th, was by nature a strong line for defence. But the position was not an easy one. For instance, owing to the long, sharp projection of the new British line secured by these troops on November 20 north-east from Gonnellieu to the Canal de

¹ Fine testimony to the great work of the British Army in France during 1917 and the soundness of its strategy. Had it not been for our offensives at Ypres, Cambrai, etc., Ludendorff would not have had to wait till November 30 for his first success.

l'Escaut, our guns for dealing with Crèvecœur, Rumilly, and the Masnières-Beaurevoir defences thereabouts necessarily had to be placed close to our new front. So that almost as soon as the enemy had crossed the canal he was in the midst of these battery positions. The disparity between the number of troops defending Bonavis and the numbers of the attackers was certainly not so marked as it was farther south, where troops of the 55th Division held the line. But the accessibility to the enemy of our gun positions was perhaps a matter that should have been rather more closely taken into account in calculating what force would be sufficient to hold the line against a really heavy attack.

But, when all is said, it remains that the German attack was not only powerful, it was able and well thought out. Justice should be done to the skill of the German general in command at Cambrai, Von Marwitz, as far as this southern phase of the German attack was concerned. As we shall see, the tactics were different from those used in the northern part of the battlefield on the same morning. Constant massed attacks in great force all along the line characterised the German stroke there; though, as the front attacked was in the north a much shorter one and our troops thicker, perhaps the difference in method was compulsory. In the attack between Masnières and Vendhuile, the enemy, having succeeded in making gaps through our front line, pushed on without waiting to break the resistance of the strong points which were scattered here and there in accordance with the elastic system of defence that we—like the Germans—had adopted since 1916. He pushed boldly through at various points, leaving his local reserves to dispose of such garrisons of strong points as might hold out. Whether he could have done so with impunity had the defence been in greater depth and the numbers of our troops more considerable on Bonavis ridge and at the shoulder of the salient is another matter. As it was, he chose good ground for the experiment, and it succeeded. Taught by our experiences on the opening day of the Somme, and later, when we suffered by passing through the German lines

without stopping to dispose of strong points, we had thought out a safer method of attack : our troops henceforth worked steadily forward, as far as conditions of ground, etc., would allow, and the tendency was for the whole attack to stop until resisting strong points were overcome. This was the best way—having regard to the general standard of the training of our troops—when the Germans were still holding their forward positions in strength. But later, as the result of the increasing success of our attack, the Germans changed their method of defence, adopting one more suited to resist or at any rate to minimise the effects of our improved system. Forward positions were then usually not held in considerable strength. A more elastic system of defence was favoured. We copied this German system of defence, but the Germans in the southern attack at Cambrai did not pursue the offensive system that their defensive tactics had been designed to meet. They followed a new system of their own, which the elastic method of defence was not specially adapted to withstand, especially on ground such as existed in this area.

There is not much more to be said of this remarkably successful stroke by the enemy on the south side of the battlefield. The arrangements to meet it are open to some criticism ; but the criticism can easily be overdone. This is a different matter from the earlier failure to provide for swift exploitation on November 20-21. If some mistakes were made in regard to November 30 in this area, they were of a kind more or less common to all the belligerents throughout the struggle on the west ; and it can certainly be claimed that the Third Army arrangements on the northern end of the battle on that date proved admirable.

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Dealing with the military direction on the Western Front, and with its decisions and the controversies springing therefrom, this book is not strictly concerned with the record of individual feats in the field—with that deliberate sacrifice of self which argues immortality in man. But there is a group of closely connected incidents relating to the northern

attack on November 30 which cannot be passed over here. It is constantly recurring to the thoughts of those who were present at the battlefield or have made a study of the operations ; and the emotion it stirs is deep. Cambrai was compact of courage, in fighting man and officer. There was a wealth of it on both sides as soon as the Germans recovered from the first shock. The despatch mentioned, for example, the valour of that German artillery officer who, single-handed, fought against our tanks at Flesquières ridge. Acknowledgment of valour in the opponent is the true military spirit ;¹ a lesson in chivalry which war can teach to peace. The courage of these German divisions cannot be questioned which, in wave following wave, advanced on the north side of the battlefield on November 30 in a great attempt to smash our line between Bourlon Wood and Tadpole Copse. Pertinacity on that scale had scarcely been experienced since the first Battle of Ypres. But it is the conduct of the three British divisions which met the attack that concerns us here. Between Bourlon Wood and Tadpole Copse just west of Mœuvres, the 47th, the 2nd and the 56th Divisions, from east to west in the order named, were in line on the morning of the 30th when the German attack started between 8 and 9 o'clock. The 47th and the 56th were London Territorials. The 56th Division had been in the line since the opening day of the battle. Its position was on the extreme left of our attack on November 20, and it had begun to take an active part in the operations on November 21. Next day it attacked and captured Tadpole Copse and a portion of the Hindenburg Line near by, threatening the German positions in Mœuvres and about Inchy. On the morning of November 30, the right brigade of the 56th was holding this new front ; west of Tadpole Copse its left brigade formed a defensive flank.² The neigh-

¹ 'May I give a word of caution to my countrymen against the unsportsmanlike habit of abusing one's enemies ? Let us avoid what Mr. Kipling, during the Boer War, described as "killing Kruger with your mouth." '—Lord Roberts in *The Hibbert Journal*, October 1914.

² The division, during 1917, took part in six attacks, at Arras, Ypres, Cambrai and elsewhere.

bour on the right of the 56th Division had been till November 26 the 36th Division ; and both had been fighting hard, for the enemy's resistance in and around Mœuvres had soon stiffened—he was resolved not to lose the high ground immediately north and north-west of that village.

The 2nd Division, on the right of the 56th, had taken over the front from the 36th on the night of November 26-27, and carried out a lesser operation on the 29th ; whilst the 47th had taken over from the 62nd Division the front at Bourlon Wood and immediately west of the wood on the night of November 28-29. Both were preparing their positions against the expected German attack. They had barely time to do so when the storm broke on both of them and on the 56th on the morning of November 30.

There has been a difference of opinion whether this northern attack or the German attack earlier in the morning on the Gouzeaucourt side was the main one. Ludendorff writes of the latter as the main attack, whereas the British regarded it as the lesser, though successful, one. The point is not very material. What is certain is that this attack on the north was a massed one of great power and resolution. The front of attack being narrower, and our troops spread less thinly, the enemy could not hope to succeed by the tactics he used on the south. Here he advanced in a solid mass, four divisions attacking at the start, with three in close reserve.

The plan evidently was to break through the three British divisions between Bourlon Wood and Tadpole Copse by irresistible force. Persisted in through November 30 and part of the next day, it completely failed. The British divisions put up a superb defence ; rifle, bayonet, bomb, machine gun, Lewis gun, Stokes mortar, and field artillery being employed, resolutely and scientifically, to about their utmost capacities. This was a private soldier's day ; but it was, too, a fighting officer's day. It is to be hoped that one day a full, illuminating account of the Battle of Mœuvres November 30-December 1 will be given to the nation after we have the German version in some detail. How incom-

parably more dramatic, more interesting, is this struggle at Mœuvres than the vast majority of subjects that we have concerned ourselves with during the last five years! It may be a small episode, in regard to length of front and numbers of men, compared with many operations in 1917. Yet the force employed in actual fighting by the two sides at this part of the field cannot have been short of a hundred thousand men, and the struggle whilst it lasted was desperate. Had the Germans broken down our defence in this area, the whole position of the Third Army must have been in grave peril—bearing in mind the critical state of things for the British at midday on the southern side.

Bourlon Wood was shelled during the night of November 29-30, and shortly before 9 in the morning the enemy directed his barrage on our front line of posts as well as on our front along the Bapaume-Cambrai road, severing by these means all connection between the two right battalions of the 2nd Division and the rest of our forces.¹ A few minutes later, German troops in large numbers came over the ridge west of Bourlon Wood, with the object of breaking through the line where the 2nd Division joined the 47th. At once the Germans were caught by our artillery barrage. They were killed in numbers, but the attack could not at once be stopped. It pressed on. It forced back the left of the 47th, and carried some outposts of the 2nd Division. Now, however, as the increasing masses of Germans showed themselves above the ridge, the direct fire of British field-guns began to tell. Machine guns, too, concealed in the famous sugar factory close to Graincourt on the Bapaume-Cambrai road, and in a sunken road south-west of Bourlon

¹ The critical front held by the 2nd Division on November 30 lay from a point just west of the southern part of Bourlon Wood (where it joined with the front of the 47th Division) to south of Mœuvres where it joined the front of the 56th Division, which was relieved on December 2 by the 51st Division. It ran south-west to the Canal du Nord, where it turned north to a point near Mœuvres, then west to the junction with the 56th. It was held, from east to west, by the 1st Royal Berkshires, 17th Royal Fusiliers, the King's Royal Rifle Corps, the 2nd South Staffordshires, the 13th Essex, and the 17th Middlesex.

Wood, joined in. The survivors of the overwhelmed posts of the 2nd Division managed, somehow, to get farther back to shell holes, where they held on. The struggle in this part of the line continued till midday. Then, for a time, the Germans were forced back. The intense fire of the artillery of the 2nd and 47th Divisions, added to rifle and Lewis and machine guns, had saved the situation.

Whilst this fight to the right of our line was going on, the Germans farther west were attacking two other units of the 2nd Division, namely, the 17th Bn. Royal Fusiliers and the 1st Bn. King's Royal Rifle Corps; and again, to the left of these, near Mœuvres, the 6th and 169th and 168th Infantry Brigades of the 56th Division.

When the attack fell on the Royal Fusiliers, they were withdrawing from an advanced sap and trench which, owing to its exposed position, could not be maintained against so powerful a force as the Germans were bringing to bear. Dead ground concealed the Germans at this point: they were able to attack suddenly and unobserved. Therefore, the company of the Fusiliers in the most advanced position was ordered to fall back and leave a rear-guard to cover the withdrawal. Captain Stone, who under very heavy fire had been standing on the parapet with the telephone in his hand, watching the Germans and keeping his brigade well informed of their movements, decided to stay with the rear-guard. Lieutenant Benzecry acted likewise. They and their men died fighting. Not one survived. The rear-guard's action, aided by the machine gunners, enabled the battalion to form a block in the trench, reorganise its position and ward off the German stroke.

A very heavy attack was made at this time on the King's Royal Rifle Corps. When the Germans appeared two or three hundred yards off on the top of the rise, they were met by a volume of fire, coolly and precisely directed, from rifles, machine and Lewis guns, which killed and wounded large numbers and forced the survivors to fall back. On and off throughout the day, Germans continued to advance against our front line here. They never reached it. Many daunt-

less troops strove to creep forward and enter our lines, when the massed attacks failed, but British snipers and Lewis gun detachments disposed of them all.

Soon after 9 A.M. the right of the 56th Division was hotly engaged. The Germans advanced from the north towards the Canal du Nord; and on both sides of the canal they delivered fierce attacks on the 6th and 169th Infantry Brigades. They forced their way into our line at one spot south of Mœuvres. Whereupon Captain A. M. C. M'Ready-Diarmid (17th Bn. Middlesex Regiment) led his company through the German barrage, captured a number of prisoners, and forced back the assailants some 500 yards. This officer's record is amazing even for a field like that of Mœuvres and Bourlon on November 30. On December 1, when the Germans had again forced a way into our positions, he led a counter-attack which drove them back. By rare skill in bomb-throwing he killed or wounded over eighty of the enemy himself. This splendid soldier lost his life immediately after he had retrieved, by his initiative and resolution, a perilous situation.

In the afternoon of November 30 the Germans pressed on again to the attack south-east of Mœuvres, and forced a way into our line held at this point by the 13th Bn. Essex Regiment of the 2nd Division. They isolated a company of the regiment which was in a trench on the west side of the Canal du Nord, near Lock 5, which the Germans had captured earlier in the day. But here their success ended. The Essex and the 2nd Bn. South Staffordshires stopped the enemy's progress, and the isolated company would neither surrender nor budge. At 4 P.M. the men realised there was small hope of being rescued. The two surviving officers, Lieutenant J. D. Robinson and 2nd Lieutenant E. L. Corps, therefore called a council of war consisting of themselves, with the Company Sergeant-Major A. H. Edwards, and Platoon Sergeants Phillips, Parsons, Fairbrass, Lodge, and Legg. They all resolved to have no surrender, and to fight it out. The safety of the regiment depended largely on the length and determination of the resistance these few isolated

men could offer to the massed attacks of the Germans. They sent back two runners, who contrived to get through and tell Battalion Headquarters of this decision. The company held out that day and into the night. They could be heard fighting on ; but all attempts to reach and rescue them failed, owing to their isolated position and the strength of the enemy forces. Meanwhile, the regiment had been able to reorganise its defence, so that here as elsewhere the crisis passed.

The machine gunners at Lock 5 also held out, and fought to the end, making the enemy pay a big price for their lives.

Returning to the line on the right, held by the 2nd and 47th Divisions, we find the same struggle kept up against mass attacks which had been going on through the morning of the 30th. West of Bourslon Wood the Germans attacked on nearly a mile of front. The intensity of our fire checked and threw them back in most places, but on the right of the 2nd they captured three posts—which we recaptured two days later. As a result, on the left of the 47th a dangerous gap was made between 1/6th and 1/5th Bns. London Regiment. Whereupon the officers in command gathered together a reserve company and the staffs of their respective headquarters—including runners, cooks, orderlies, signallers—and led successful counter-attacks which closed the gap. As for the three rushed posts of the 2nd Division, there was never a thought of surrender. The men all fought it out : and when on December 2 the ground was recovered their bodies lay littered indistinguishably with a heap of dead assailants.

Elsewhere on this ground the 1st Royal Berkshire company hung on in five posts, beating back the enemy till reinforcements were able to extricate them and restore the position. Led by Lieutenant Valentine, they held out for six hours against attack after attack of an enemy vastly superior in number, who in the end was forced to retire in disorder.

On the right of the 47th Division, the 141st Brigade was heavily attacked in the afternoon. Here, in the dense

undergrowth of Bourlon Wood, gas shells compelled the men to wear their masks for hours at a stretch. But when the Germans attacked they were flung back. Lewis gunners, full of initiative, ran out with their weapons as soon as the attack started and shot down the advancing German infantry. Later that afternoon two attacks were made on the left of the 2nd Division. Both failed, the enemy again suffering heavy losses : the fire of an 18-pounder battery here got well on to his infantry in crowded trenches.

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And so that tremendous day wore at length to a close, and everywhere between Bourlon and Mœuvres the seven divisions, pouring forward to overwhelm us by wave upon wave of fierce attack, had been brought to a standstill by the three. The casualties in defence had been severe, but in this instance the casualties of attack proved far heavier. There is not the smallest doubt that the 2nd, 47th and 56th Divisions on November 30 and December 1—when the attack gradually died down—put thousands of Germans out of action. These divisions were manned by well-trained troops, who thoroughly understood the scientific way of using rifle, Lewis, and machine gun and field artillery. Their knowledge and training were up-to-date : and therein lies a most important military lesson of November 30.

But there is another reason why the struggle between Bourlon and Mœuvres is worth recalling often and dwelling on. This ground, it is true, was held, against an almost overwhelming superiority in numbers, by technical skill and good leading. But it was held by the grit and character of hard-fighting men. The men and officers who held out in advanced or isolated posts, and fought with rifle and bayonet and bomb till they were all killed or until they had—as happened in some instances—actually forced back their massed opponents : the position could not have been saved or, later, restored except for them. And that, after all, because of the character it proves, is the greatest asset a nation in arms can have. It is character, the form of it which denotes absolute loyalty and trustworthiness, that

counts first. That is as true of war in its modern, scientific methods as of the battles of past centuries.

Character remains the supreme essential, alike in the rank and file, in the subaltern, in the leader of armies.

There are provinces of peace where character of this kind, steadfast and loyal, does at times appear to be at a discount, and where cleverness alone, even if superficial, pays best. But that would not have brought us successfully through the vast conflict on the Western Front.

